Framing the Opportunity

Eight State Policy Recommendations that Support Postsecondary Credential Completion for Underserved Populations

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

BY RACHEL PLEASANTS MCDONNELL, WITH MICHAEL LAWRENCE COLLINS

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future (JFF) is a national nonprofit that builds educational and economic opportunity for underserved populations in the United States. JFF develops innovative programs and public policies that increase college readiness and career success and build a more highly skilled, competitive workforce. With over 30 years of experience, JFF is a recognized national leader in bridging education and work to increase economic mobility and strengthen our economy. Learn more at www.jff.org.

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Introduction

Postsecondary credentials are becoming the currency for economic mobility in the current American economy. Sixty-five percent of all jobs in the United States will require a postsecondary degree or credential by 2020, but at the current rate that postsecondary institutions are awarding degrees, the United States is at risk to fall short by 5 million workers.[1]

Once first among nations in its postsecondary completion rates, the United States now has fallen behind in international comparisons. In light of such trends, increasing national attention has focused on the importance of postsecondary access and success for all students. States, too, are setting ambitious goals for increasing the number of residents with a postsecondary credential.

Altering these postsecondary completion trends is essential at a time when economic mobility is declining and the wealth gap is widening. Even as the U.S. economy has made strides since the Great Recession, many Americans have been left behind in the economic recovery. In particular, there are populations—low-income youth and adults, young people ages 16 to 24 who are disconnected from school and work (often referred to as "opportunity youth"), justice-involved youth, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, and immigrants—for whom crossing the threshold into the middle class remains out of reach. For youth and adults from these populations, postsecondary credential attainment can increase their chances of developing the skills and competencies necessary to fully participate in our economy and share in its growth. The challenge, however, is that these very populations have been among the least well served in our nation's higher education system, in terms of both completion and employment outcomes. To date, national attention has focused primarily on raising overall completion rates without examining who is benefiting from recent reforms and who is not.

In this paper, Jobs for the Future (JFF) posits that paying attention to equity issues will help the United States reach its national credential attainment goals and—more importantly—be true to the American ethos of being the land of opportunity. And to level the playing field, we need to understand how current systems and policies facilitate or stymie access to and completion of postsecondary credentials with labor market value for specific population groups.

Postsecondary policy is a powerful lever for increasing underserved populations' access to economic opportunity. In this paper, JFF elaborates on over a decade of work supporting community college access and completion to offer a more inclusive policy approach. This approach is specifically targeted to ensuring that our postsecondary systems are designed in ways that narrow achievement gaps, especially for those populations of students and workers who are at particular risk of not gaining the skills, competencies, and credentials needed to share in and contribute to our nation's economic growth. JFF is committed to addressing issues of equity in all of our policy work, and equity is a core principle guiding the efforts of the Policy Leadership Trust for Student Success. Our STEM state policy work also focuses on ensuring greater access to high-wage STEM careers for historically underrepresented populations, including women and students of color.

We believe it is essential to explore federal, state, and local policy with an equity lens, identifying policies and policy gaps that can both help and hinder local efforts to create stronger postsecondary educational opportunities for underserved populations. This policy approach strives to better understand the systems in which programs operate. Originally developed for the Ford Foundation's Corridors of College Success initiative, this paper focuses specifically on policy recommendations for opportunity youth, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, and immigrants.[2] The recommendations are intended for states, colleges, and community-based organizations committed to improving educational and economic outcomes for underserved populations.

What We Mean by Underserved Populations

Our policy recommendations focus on populations that are both underrepresented in postsecondary education and underserved by our educational institutions and systems.

We are opting to use the term "underserved" to emphasize that multiple systems—including education, workforce, social services, and criminal justice—have consistently failed to meet their needs. Each population faces a mix of systemic and individual barriers to postsecondary success, including financial barriers, basic skill and language gaps, and a lack of knowledge about the educational and career opportunities available. Many have also been led over time to believe that they are not college material. Because many individual barriers, such as low basic skills, are reinforced by inequitable policies, new policy has the potential to alleviate individual barriers to success.

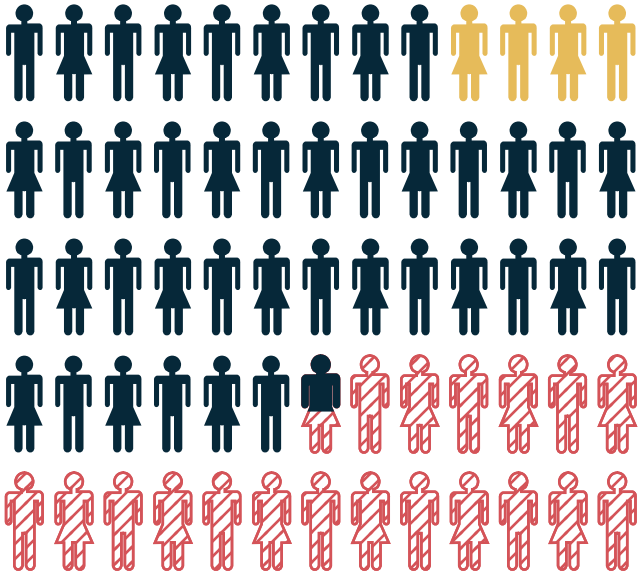
While there are numerous population groups that fall under the category of underrepresented and underserved, this paper focuses on three: opportunity youth, immigrants (both documented and undocumented), and justice-involved individuals (currently and formerly incarcerated youth and adults as well as those with a criminal record). There are important differences in the specific policies that impact each group, but there are also many similarities across the types of policies that could have the largest impact. These population categories are also not mutually exclusive; opportunity youth, for example, may also be undocumented immigrants or have a history of involvement with the justice system. Many of these target populations also include subpopulations that face unique barriers. For example, while not all youth in foster care fall under the category of opportunity youth, those who do have the added challenge of losing access to a variety of resources and services when transitioning out of foster care. Immigrants who arrived in the United States later in life and are not fully English proficient face different challenges than youth who have spent most of their lives in the United States and are fluent in English.

Collectively, these populations represent a large percentage of the American adult population—by our estimates, up to 100 million individuals. A disproportionate percentage of these 100 million individuals are people of color. At the national level, youth disconnection rates for African American were 21.6 percent, 27.8 percent for Native Americans, and 16.3 percent for Latinos, as compared to 11.3 percent for whites and 7.9 percent for Asian Americans.[3] In 2010, black men were more than 6 times as likely to be incarcerated as white men, and Hispanic men were more than 2.5 times more likely to be incarcerated.[4] The trend holds true for court-involved youth—black youth are 5 times more likely than white youth to experience juvenile residential placement, and Hispanic youth are twice as likely to be confined.[5]

The number of people shut out of opportunities for economic mobility is staggering. If the United States is to live up to its historical standing as a land of equality and mobility, we must increase the percentage of adults with postsecondary credentials and ensure their entry into family-supporting careers. To accomplish that goal, it is imperative that we reform systems that have not addressed the needs of the 100 million underserved people in our country.

Underserved Populations at a Glance

Justice-Involved Individuals



ONLY 6%
of incarcerated adults have earned an associate's degree or higher.[6]

65 MILLION adults in the United States have a criminal record.[7]

30%
of inmates have less than a high school degree.[8]

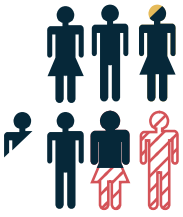
Immigrants

30%
have less than a high school diploma.[9]

42 MILLION immigrants in the US[10]

51%
of immigrants over 18 speak English less than very well.[11]

Opportunity Youth



ONLY 1%
of opportunity youth will have completed at least an associate's degree by age 28.[12]

5.5 MILLION young people ages 16 to 24 who are out of school and work.[13]

30–40%
of opportunity youth lack a high school diploma.[14]

Supporting Underserved Populations

Toward a More Inclusive and Equitable Policy Agenda

Addressing the unique needs of underserved populations requires both programmatic and policy intervention, with public policy laying the foundation to create, scale, and sustain postsecondary programs and structures that lead to higher completion rates.

The important distinction of this policy approach is the focus on how policy impacts specific populations, and its explicit emphasis on increasing equity of educational and economic outcomes. It builds upon JFF's existing policy work by examining the policies and incentives—and lack thereof—that support underserved populations as they access, enroll in, and complete postsecondary education. While many programs exist to help underserved populations access and succeed in college, there have been far fewer efforts to assess how well our postsecondary systems themselves are supporting underserved populations.

This paper recommends policies that support and expand the implementation of guided pathways. The recommendations build on JFF's structured pathways completion framework, which is informed by the evidence on student completion, input from national completion experts, and JFF's extensive experience supporting states and communities in building comprehensive college and career pathways. These recommendations are also informed by the "Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework" developed through Completion by Design, a national initiative to use policy, practice, and programs to develop community college pathways that increase students' likelihood of earning a credential.[15] The Loss/Momentum Framework breaks the student experience into four benchmarks: connection, entry, progress, and completion. The Loss/Momentum Framework serves as the underpinnings for guided pathways, which emphasize clarifying the student pathway, helping students get onto and stay on a path, and ensuring that students are learning.[16] In addition to policies supporting students as they enroll in and complete guided pathways, we examine enabling system infrastructure, including policies that shape institutional structures.

Notably, this paper is not a comprehensive scan of all policies impacting underserved populations, but rather an exploration of high-leverage policy areas that can either advance or thwart attempts to improve equity of educational and economic outcomes. It also provides recommendations for how states and institutions can focus their policy efforts.

While postsecondary policy is the primary focus of this paper, numerous other policy areas impact underserved populations' access to and outcomes of postsecondary education. These include K-12 policies, particularly those that govern the high school-to-college transition; workforce development policies, such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act; and other areas regarding immigration reform or criminal justice. Several of these policies are currently being restructured and implemented in ways that can supplement and strengthen the approach outlined in this paper.

Guided Pathways as a Support for Underserved Populations

In a guided pathway design, students enter through intentional on-ramps, receive comprehensive intake services, develop an educational plan, and enroll in redesigned academic pathways that have been developed with educational coherence, acceleration, and labor market alignment in mind. Along the pathway, students receive intensive supports, and faculty and staff monitor students' progress to keep them on track to completion. At their core, guided pathways transform the system, making it student-focused, as the primary goal is to improve the student experience and increase success from entry to completion. Because these reforms are comprehensive in nature, state policy provides critical incentives and supports for systemic change.

Many postsecondary leaders rightly view the guided pathways movement as a critical tool for increasing equity and economic mobility. Indeed, many of the central elements of guided pathways, such as acceleration and intensive supports, are essential to helping underserved populations overcome traditional hurdles. Because many of these students enter postsecondary education not yet ready for college-level coursework, they are often overrepresented in developmental and adult education programs. As such, accelerated on-ramps and developmental education redesign are essential for ensuring that these students are able to advance into credit-bearing programs of study.

For the pathways movement to advance equity and economic mobility, policies and programs will need to accommodate the increasing diversity of students enrolling in postsecondary education. For example, advising may need to be tailored differently, or provided more intensively, to meet the needs of populations with distinct barriers to persistence. Rather than being placed in regular college developmental education courses, immigrant students with limited English language proficiency may need other options for remediation. Financial aid eligibility assumes that most younger students are still dependent on their parents for financial support, but some opportunity youth are estranged from their parents or unable to depend on their support. Many student data systems and metrics focus on first-time, full-time freshmen pursuing traditional academic programs and credentials. This leaves out the large number of underserved students who attend part-time, as well as the numerous students, including justice-involved individuals, who come to postsecondary education already possessing college credits. Pathways also need to be designed with labor market realities in mind so graduates can enter occupations with good wages and opportunities for long-term career growth. New practices and policies in each of these areas can increase college completion rates for underserved populations.

Policy as a Driver of Cultural Change

Our research and recommendations explore how policy can drive cultural change in postsecondary education. We believe that an inclusive policy approach can help reinforce and promote:

A culture of completion. Across youth-serving organizations, adult basic education and other programs and systems that work with underserved populations, many focus on postsecondary access but have not focused as clearly on college completion. To truly serve as on-ramps, programs must establish expectations and create systems that support students working toward successfully completing their postsecondary pathways.

A culture of inclusion. As we think about redesigning postsecondary education we need to also rethink our assumptions about who postsecondary institutions are designed to serve. Often, our existing systems and structures send implicit messages about who is—and is not—considered college material. The new culture must make it clear that students currently underrepresented in postsecondary education—individuals with a criminal record, immigrants, and opportunity youth—are in fact welcome at postsecondary institutions and that those institutions are designed with their needs in mind.

A culture of inquiry. We must start asking difficult questions about who is succeeding in existing programs and structures and who is not. This will require postsecondary systems to disaggregate data by race and ethnicity as well as immigration status, history of justice involvement, and other indicators of historically underserved populations, to identify and address achievement gaps.

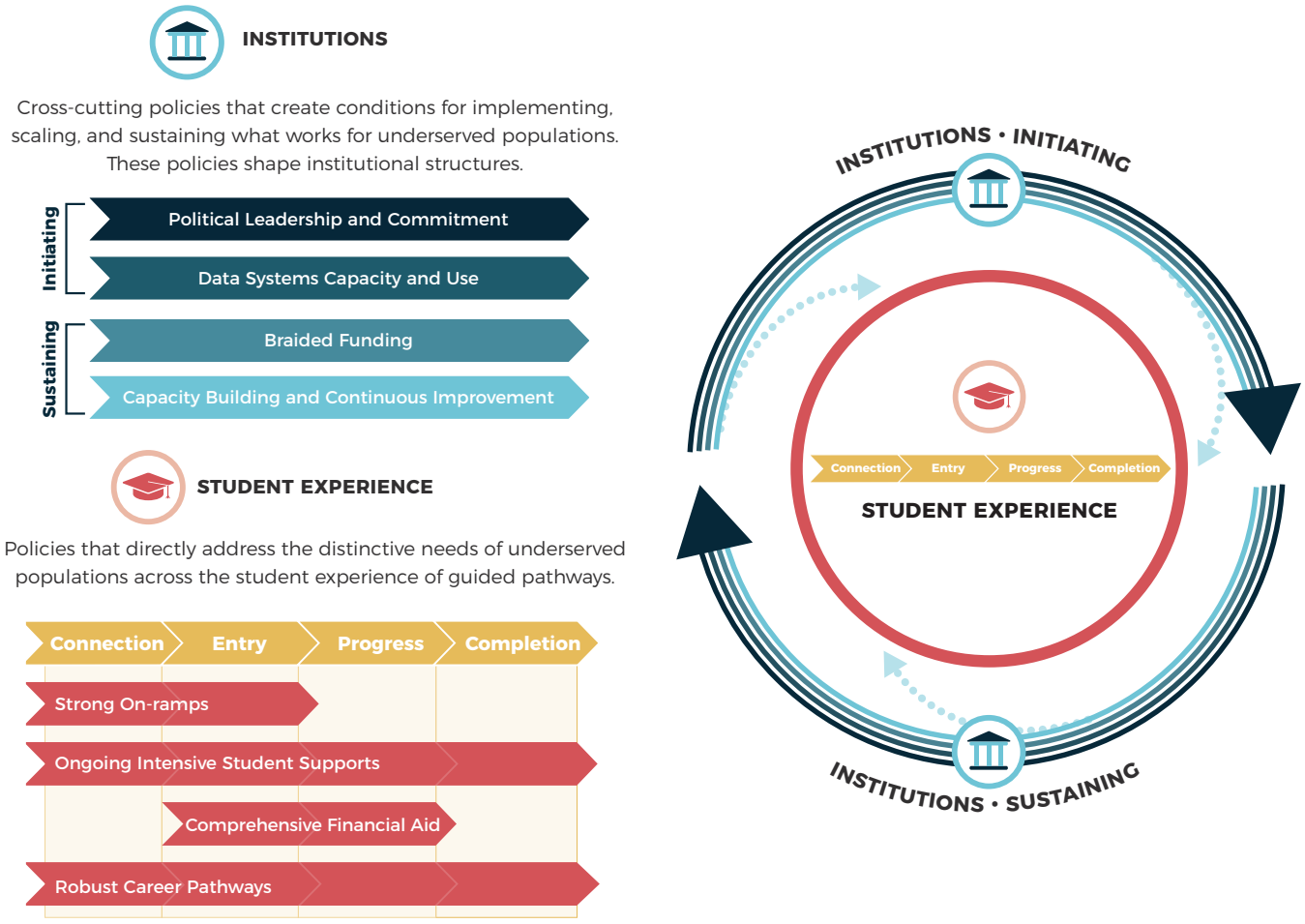
A culture of collaboration. As colleges aim to serve a more diverse population, they recognize that they can't do everything on their own—nor do they need to. As David Gómez, president of Hostos Community College, explains, "Community colleges can do anything, but they can't do everything."[17] Community-based organizations, workforce systems, advocacy organizations, and other partners have expertise and capacity that complement what colleges can provide for their students. Stronger webs of collaboration across multiple partners can enhance the community's ability to ensure that underserved populations succeed in postsecondary education and beyond.

An Inclusive Policy Approach for Guided Pathways

Our policy recommendations center on two primary avenues for impact:

- Incentivizing or requiring the development of guided pathways: structured academic and career pathways that address the distinctive needs of underserved populations across the student experience, which is divided into the four stages described by the Loss-Momentum Framework: connection with the institution, entry into a program of study, progress through a program of study, and completion of a degree or credential; and
- Cross-cutting policies that create conditions for initiating, implementing, scaling, and sustaining what works for underserved populations. These policies shape institutional structures.

The following graphic illustrates how cross-cutting policies intersect with the student experience and influence students' ability to enter and succeed in guided pathways.



Policy Levers to Improve Access and Success for Underserved Populations

Eight Recommendations

#1 POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND COMMITMENT

Make improving postsecondary outcomes for underrepresented and underserved populations a state priority

State and system leadership can set the expectation that raising success rates in aggregate is insufficient if there are still access and completion gaps for the most underserved populations. A strong statewide commitment to identifying and addressing systemic barriers to completion for underserved populations is the first step toward advancing the policy recommendations discussed in this paper.

Current Conditions

Over the past decade, states have intensified their focus on postsecondary success. This new emphasis can be seen in the proliferation of outcomes-based funding models as well as numerous initiatives designed to specifically address persistence and completion. Colleges and state postsecondary systems have joined initiatives such as Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design, and the Student Success Center Network, and have used federal grant programs such as the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants program (TAACCCT) and First in the World to advance innovative models. However, most postsecondary systems have not yet made a point of examining how they serve specific groups of students or assessing who is left out of postsecondary education altogether. Some states are starting to set completion targets for minorities and low-income students, but have not necessarily examined specific underserved population groups such as reentry populations.

Policy Opportunities

Public commitment and attention from state political and education leaders can shift the college success discussion to more intentionally focus on equity. Political leaders can set an expectation that colleges will assess how well they are serving these communities. State lawmakers can also communicate to the public why it is important to focus on underserved populations and describe the benefits to the state's citizenry. State leaders can start to identify and address equity gaps by making a public commitment to improving access and completion for underserved populations. In California, for example, the community college system's strategic plan includes "innovative programs and outreach for growing populations."[18]

Create opportunities for dialogue between practitioners and policymakers

Regular dialogue between local practitioners—including community colleges and their community partners—and state policymakers can ensure a stronger voice for those who work with underrepresented student populations. This kind of dialogue can make it easier to identify policy barriers and opportunities and ensure state and system policy does not create unintended consequences for underserved populations. In Washington State, the Student Success Center has established closing equity gaps as a core priority. The Center regularly brings colleges together with state leaders to support the expansion of guided pathways; during these convenings, trained facilitators ensure that colleges maintain an equity focus as they engage in pathway redesign. Disaggregated student outcome data—discussed in recommendation number two—can be a starting point for these discussions. A 2017 report from the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California suggests a number of guiding questions for data-informed conversations.[19] For example: How would closing attainment gaps contribute to overall attainment goals?

Establish a statewide task force

States can begin a conversation by assembling a task force to focus on improving outcomes for a specific target population. For example, a statewide task force on opportunity youth can bring together representatives from K-12 education, postsecondary education, workforce development, health and human services, industry, economic development, and even opportunity youth themselves to identify specific barriers to postsecondary education and career success for opportunity youth. A task force can examine data, analyze current policies and practices, assess the capacity of education and training systems, identify system shortcomings, and make recommendations for action. The findings of a task force can be used to set a state policy agenda and to galvanize local action.

Promote state and local collaboration

For many underserved populations, successful interventions require robust partnerships at the state and local levels. Colleges do not always have the capacity or expertise to work effectively with underserved populations, but there are many organizations with a specific population focus that can serve as partners. Because these organizations often have goals of increasing college access, these partnerships can be mutually beneficial. States can use funding and grants to require or promote cross-system collaboration and adoption of best practices designed for underserved populations. Depending on the population, this collaboration may include public agencies, such as the departments of justice, corrections, or children and families/child welfare. Other potential partners include community-based organizations, advocacy agencies, workforce boards, and chambers of commerce. California passed Assembly Bill 86 in 2013 to create the Adult Education Consortium Program to incentivize regional partners from adult and higher education to work together to develop on-ramps for adult learners. Consortia received funding to evaluate current adult education offerings, identify systemic gaps, and establish plans to strengthen programmatic offerings and improve the options for seamless transition into postsecondary education.[20]

In the case of justice-involved individuals, partnerships between postsecondary agencies and departments of correction can spur greater investment in correctional education. North Carolina has an interagency agreement between the Department of Corrections and the community college system that ensures provision of adult basic education, career and technical education, and postsecondary vocational and academic education to prisoners throughout the state.[21]

Many states are now developing career pathway initiatives built on strong cross-agency partnerships, and these collaborative efforts are bolstered by federal policies that encourage or incentivize the development of career pathways systems. For example, WIOA, enacted in 2014, requires states to establish career pathways that connect workforce (including youth programs), adult education, and postsecondary systems in order to be eligible for funding under the act. Similarly, the 2014 Social Innovation Fund Request for Proposals explicitly called for cross-sector, collaborative efforts to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. At the local level, strong partnerships between colleges, workforce investment boards, adult education programs, human services systems, and community-based organizations can expand a community's capacity to meet the needs of underserved populations.

#2 DATA SYSTEMS CAPACITY AND USE

Examine enrollment, retention, and completion data for immigrants, justice-involved individuals, opportunity youth, and other underserved populations to identify access and achievement gaps and set improvement targets.

Because they often aren't counted or identified as such, members of the underserved populations discussed here are effectively invisible to the systems that could help them. If states and colleges do not track who is not accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education and training programs, it will be nearly impossible to make the necessary programmatic and policy changes and to assess whether the resulting changes lead to improved outcomes. Assessing baseline data and establishing accountability metrics is a necessary first step in establishing and scaling programs and policies that address the needs of underserved populations. However, efforts to improve data collection must be balanced with a commitment to students' rights to privacy and nondisclosure.

Current Conditions

The disparate outcomes of underserved populations often go undetected because data systems are not designed to track disaggregated outcomes for specific subgroups. But in order for states and colleges to measure how underserved populations are faring in postsecondary education, they need access to longitudinal disaggregated data on key outcomes, including enrollment, retention, credit attainment, credential attainment, continuation to further education, and employment and earnings. As of 2016, 47 states had received at least one federal Statewide Longitudinal Data System Grant, but only 16 states plus D.C. had a complete data system.[22] Even in states that have longitudinal data systems, issues of data quality and difficulty accessing data can limit their utility.

Once state systems have identified target populations and analyzed all available data, they can develop plans for closing outcome and equity gaps. But note that disaggregating data is challenging: collecting accurate data is difficult, and asking underserved populations to self-identify can have unintended consequences. Often there is no clear-cut way to identify which students belong to which groups. Opportunity youth, for example, likely don't self-identify as such, nor is there a clear-cut definition for who counts as an opportunity youth. Meanwhile, undocumented students and those with a criminal record may be reluctant to volunteer this information. Asking students about their immigration status or history with the justice system can dissuade them from enrolling altogether. Research indicates that even when students' criminal backgrounds are not used for screening purposes, just asking the question on the application—and requiring students to provide details about their conviction—can deter students from completing the application and enrolling in college.[23] One study found that within the State University of New York system (including both two-year and four-year colleges), 62.5 percent of applicants who checked the felony conviction box did not complete their applications, compared with 21 percent of the general population.[24]

Policy Opportunities

Despite the challenges, accurate data can have enormous benefits. The data help states and institutions understand the educational trajectory of underserved populations, including the points at which they are most likely to drop out. Accurate identification of underserved populations also helps advisors and financial aid staff support students in accessing available financial aid, addressing the unique challenges facing students with criminal records, and providing other targeted supports to help subgroups of students. For example, because some careers exclude workers with criminal records, career counselors need to make sure that students are aware of the potential barriers before starting a program.

▸ Establish state longitudinal data systems

The National Skills Coalition recommends that "all states should have longitudinal data systems that can illustrate how combinations of education, workforce, and human service programs are providing opportunity for lifelong learning and sustainable employment."[25] Ideally, longitudinal data systems track students from a variety of on-ramps to postsecondary education (including high schools, adult education, and workforce training programs) and ultimately into the labor market. State policy can facilitate the development and management of such data systems and can also make recommendations for what data analyses should be conducted. States can

use this data to assess which populations are successfully transitioning into postsecondary institutions, what credentials they are earning, and what happens to them once they enter the labor market.

At the state and local levels, longitudinal data systems as well as data-sharing agreements with community partners can help with tracking student outcomes across systems and programs and can also provide valuable information to drive continuous improvement efforts. For example, knowing how students fare once they transition into postsecondary education can help community-based organizations strengthen the design of their on-ramp programs to better prepare students for the transition to college. Meanwhile, the data shared by the community partners can help colleges better connect students with the appropriate resources once they have enrolled. The key to making these data systems or data sharing agreements work is ensuring that data are accurate and up-to-date, as well as making it possible for a variety of stakeholders to extract actionable information.

▸ Examine intake procedures and data-sharing agreements

States must establish policies and infrastructure that allow for disaggregation of data while respecting students' right to privacy. To address the inherent challenges in data collection, states can convene college institutional research directors and researchers to identify strategies for better tracking the success of underserved populations, either through more robust intake processes or via better data matching with other systems such as corrections departments. New data collection procedures should be rigorously examined to determine whether there may be adverse impacts on underserved populations. College staff, too, must be trained not to alienate incoming students with questions about sensitive topics such as criminal records and immigration status.

▸ Create accountability structures with clear outcome targets

State policy can support improved outcomes for underserved populations through the development of population-specific statewide goals and incentives, including clear targets for postsecondary enrollment and completion. Accountability structures that monitor how well colleges are serving specific populations keep the focus on improving institutional practices in ways that advance completion goals for all students, including underserved populations. The Texas Closing the Gaps 15-year strategic plan, established in 2000, set numerical goals for participation and success in postsecondary education for Hispanics, African Americans, and whites.[26] Annual reports detail progress on closing enrollment and achievement gaps. The 2016 final progress summary reported the state coming very close to meeting its enrollment increase and degree attainment goals for Hispanic and African American students.[27]

Many states are looking to outcomes-based funding formulas as an accountability structure. Outcomes-based funding ties a portion of institutional funding to specific outcomes, such as credential attainment, rather than basing funding solely on enrollments. The Center for Law and Social Policy recommends that states consider creating equity measures to counteract the incentive for restricting access that outcomes-based funding can create, and to also reflect the fact that achieving equity of outcomes for underserved populations often requires additional resources.[28] For example, states can apply a premium to specific population groups so that colleges receive higher funding for achieving outcomes for target populations.

States can also direct colleges to conduct their own disaggregated analyses and address achievement gaps. California community colleges are required to develop student equity plans that improve outcomes for student groups who "may be disproportionately impacted by college practices, programs, or services." The identified groups may include not only racial and ethnic categories, but also youth who are currently or formerly in foster care and students with disabilities.[29] The state also provides funding for targeted supports to close achievement gaps.

#3 STRONG ON-RAMPS

Encourage or require the development of stronger on-ramps into postsecondary education from the institutions, organizations, and systems that work with underserved populations.

On-ramps build the foundations for students to transition to and enroll in postsecondary education. Since many of the populations discussed in this paper are not coming directly from high school, they need on-ramps that meet them where they are, such as alternative high school diploma programs, high school equivalency programs, ESL programs, or adult education, including "college bridge" programs. Opportunity youth and individuals coming out of correctional facilities, for example are less likely to have a high school credential and may need to earn a high school equivalency as part of the on-ramp to college.

Current Conditions

Lack of resources, limited capacity to serve the large numbers of students who would benefit from these programs, and limited connections with postsecondary education are three significant barriers to developing and expanding on-ramps for vulnerable populations. These conditions are especially acute for adult education and correctional education.

Adult education, high school equivalency, and ESL

Lack of funds severely limits adult basic education as well as reengagement programs for opportunity youth. State investment in adult education varies, but the national average annual expenditure per student is $800—a small fraction of the annual expenditures on students in K-12 and higher education.[30] The low funding levels translate to limited capacity to serve the large numbers of individuals who need these services; as a result, many programs operate with a wait list.

In addition to capacity issues, many of the programs where underserved students start their education are structurally disconnected from higher education, which makes it more challenging for participants to successfully transition to postsecondary education. Only 15 states place governance of adult education in the purview of higher education; in the majority of states, adult education falls under K-12 education. Even where adult education is offered by community colleges, it may not be offered on the college campus or provide transition services for program completers seeking to move on to college classes.

The lack of alignment with postsecondary education is a challenge for ESL programs as well. Many immigrants come to the United States for greater economic opportunity, but find themselves limited by their English skills. For these students, adult ESL (often funded through WIOA Title II) can serve as an important on-ramp to postsecondary education, but only if programs are built with the necessary rigor to prepare students for success in postsecondary education.

Correctional education

For incarcerated individuals in particular, investments in on-ramps can have a dramatic payoff, yet access to correctional education remains limited. A 2013 RAND meta-analysis found that inmates who participate in correctional education programs have a 43 percent lower rate of recidivism than those who do not, and the likelihood of post-release employment for this group increased by 13 percent.[31] However, state prisons, which house the majority of inmates, provide limited access to adult basic education and high school equivalency preparation. And, even though federal policy dictates that programs for incarcerated youth must include an educational component, the quality of education at juvenile facilities varies; lack of access to high-quality education while incarcerated puts these students at higher risk of not completing high school.[32]

For adults, access to postsecondary correctional education is even more of a challenge. While exact numbers are difficult to obtain, most estimates indicate that access to postsecondary education in jails and prisons is limited. Prisons' capacity to provide education and training is often limited by funding, space constraints, and difficulty finding qualified instructors who are willing to travel to and teach in a prison. Prisoners' lack of access to technology also limits educational opportunities.

Nationally, less than 10 percent of the incarcerated population participates in vocational or academic postsecondary education, and participation varies dramatically by state.[33] For example, in 2009-2010, North Carolina had more than 16,000 inmates engaged in postsecondary training; South Dakota had just 50.[34]

Policy Opportunities

Colleges and community partners can come together to build effective on-ramps for underserved students no matter where they start their educational trajectory. These on-ramps should be designed with college entry and employment in mind, possess sufficient academic rigor to enable participants to bypass developmental education, and include transition services to facilitate the connection to postsecondary education and careers.

Create a common definition of college and career readiness

Different colleges and on-ramp programs, including adult education and ESL, often have their own ways of defining and measuring college and career readiness, which can leave students at a disadvantage as they move into postsecondary education. A common understanding of what it means to be college and career ready, including both academic and nonacademic competencies, will help ensure more successful transitions.

At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education has already revised the national adult education standards to align with college and career-readiness standards, and is in the process of doing so for ESL. States should ensure that programs recognize these standards and adapt programming accordingly. States can also encourage colleges that offer either federally funded adult education or ESL (or noncredit ESL through continuing education) to contextualize these courses around either career pathway content or gateway class content in order to accelerate transition into regular college classes and expedite completion.

Braid funding to increase the resources available to support on-ramps

While it is discussed in more detail under recommendation number seven below, braided funding is an important tool for addressing the lack of resources for on-ramp programs. Many federal funding streams, including WIOA and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), can be used to support the activities of on-ramps. States can also consider how they allocate K-12 funds. For example, states could consider raising the age limit and flexibility of per-pupil K-12 funding to include a variety of high school diploma and equivalency programs and programs run by community colleges and community-based organizations. Currently, only two states permit per-pupil funding to follow students up to age 26.[35] It is also important to note that while undocumented immigrants have limited access to federal programs and services, WIOA Title II, which funds many ESL programs, does not require participants to be authorized to work in the United States.[36]

Allow and promote co-enrollment in postsecondary education for students in high school equivalency (including adult education) programs

Co-enrollment models greatly accelerate credential attainment by allowing participants to begin postsecondary coursework while in the process of earning a high school credential or equivalent. State and institutional policy can support co-enrollment by ensuring that the lack of a high school credential is not a barrier to entry. For example, Colorado permits community colleges and local education providers to create dropout recovery programs that co-enroll students in college classes; all earned credits count toward high school graduation as well as postsecondary degree attainment.[37] In some cases, dual enrollment policies also help cover tuition for students who are dual enrolled in a high school equivalency program; this can greatly reduce students' overall financial obligation. Kansas' AO-K Proviso provides funding to cover tuition costs for students who are co-enrolled in adult basic education and career and technical education through an integrated pathway.[38] Louisiana established a scholarship that covers adult education students' college tuition until they are able to access Pell. More details on Pell eligibility for students without a high school diploma are provided in recommendation number five.

Ensure that placement exams do not create unnecessary obstacles

Students transitioning from adult education programs are often required to take an assessment for their adult education program (usually the Test of Adult Basic

Education–TABE– or the CASAS test) as well as a college entrance exam such as Accuplacer. For many students, the additional testing can feel confusing and stressful. In order to reduce the number of tests that students have to take, Kentucky allows students transitioning into postsecondary from adult education to use their TABE test scores for math and reading placement, rather than requiring students to also take a placement exam.[39]

Increase access to correctional education and reentry programs that incorporate education and job training for current inmates and returning citizens

State education and corrections agencies can work together to ensure that more inmates can access educational and career on-ramps. Technology has the potential to greatly expand access to postsecondary education for incarcerated populations, but security concerns and statutory law often limit prisoners' access to technology and the Internet. Many states' correctional systems still use correspondence courses, but colleges are discontinuing many traditional correspondence programs in favor of technology-based distance education. Although providing Internet access in prisons poses some challenges, the educational opportunities that such access enables have prompted some prisons to provide limited Internet access for incarcerated students. For example, at Topeka Correctional Facility for Women, Washburn Technical College offers a certified production technician course that relies on online learning. Limited Internet access was established on both the minimum and maximum security sides of the prison, and students complete the OSHA10 certification and other portions of the certification online.[40] Appropriately secure online or computer-based programs could greatly expand correctional systems' capacity to provide inmates with access to education and credentials. Correctional systems can also use incentives like sentence reduction to encourage inmate participation in education and training. As of 2015, 41 states plus the District of Columbia allow inmates to earn time off their prison term for education and training attainment.[41]

In July 2015, President Obama introduced the Second Chance Pell program, an experiment to restore Pell Grant eligibility to a limited number of prisoners receiving instruction from a select set of colleges (inmate access to Pell was eliminated in 1994). Colleges selected as experimental sites were allowed to begin providing Pell-financed postsecondary instruction starting in the 2016-17 academic year.[42]

Promote greater college outreach to underserved communities

Most colleges already have strategies for reaching out to local high schools to promote awareness; similarly, to promote awareness of its programs, a college should consider outreach to public agencies, community-based organizations, national organizations that serve or advocate for underserved populations, military bases, adult education programs, and correctional systems. Colleges can also use their websites and promotional materials to welcome underserved populations. For example, the City University of New York has a DREAMERS HUB that provides information on resources and scholarships for undocumented students.[43] Also in New York, Hostos Community College and Bronx Community College have formed a strategic partnership with the Bronx Opportunity Network. The network consists of a group of community-based organizations focused on postsecondary preparation for opportunity youth; this partnership has strengthened the colleges' connection with the community and has helped college leadership understand how to be help diverse students feel welcome at their institutions.[44]

Colleges can also use employer outreach as a strategy to recruit underserved populations. Many of the populations discussed in this paper are older and likely to be working, and they may not know that college is an option for them. Colleges can partner with employers to ensure that working adults have access to postsecondary programs that can advance their careers. For example, Degrees Work, a new initiative in Louisville, Kentucky, provides employees of local companies with college coaches who can help them assess their best options for going back to school.[45]

#4 ONGOING INTENSIVE STUDENT SUPPORTS

Encourage or require ongoing, intensive supports, including transition counseling, career advising, academic advising, and non-academic support designed to address the unique needs of underrepresented populations.

Each of the populations discussed in this paper faces a mix of individual and systemic barriers to persistence and completion. Ongoing supports can make a difference by facilitating enrollment in college, access to financial aid, registering for the right classes, and access to academic and other support services. Support staff, whether located at the college or a partner organization, will need training and data to help them understand the unique barriers faced by certain student groups.

Current Conditions

Over the past decade, colleges and postsecondary systems have begun to recognize the importance of supportive services and advising for community college students, and especially for at-risk students. Investments in student advising and supports remain limited, however, and student-to-advisor ratios are stubbornly high. Even where colleges have increased their investment in advising capacity, students often need more than just basic advising: they need overall college navigation services and wraparound supports. Career guidance is equally limited, especially up-front career advising to help students select a program of study. Beyond these overall capacity issues, advising and support personnel may not have the training needed to address the specific needs of underserved populations.

Policy Opportunities

- **Ensure access to supports from on-ramps through completion**

For each of the populations discussed in this paper, targeted support services, including in some instances intensive case management, and up-front advising can increase persistence and completion. An advisor trained in the unique needs of different populations and who serves as a dedicated point of contact can give students more holistic support than a traditional college advisor. In some cases, these supports can be provided in partnership with workforce systems or with community-based organizations, which often have specialized expertise that is outside the purview of community colleges. For example, because undocumented immigrants face a variety of challenges to obtaining employment, colleges can partner with local organizations that focus on immigrant services to provide guidance on legal matters.

- **Promote or require targeted, up-front academic and career advising**

A strong up-front advising process can help students develop college and career goals, select programs of study suited to their needs, and navigate the college experience. Many states and colleges are now exploring mandatory advising for students, especially those with multiple barriers to college success. Florida's State Bill 1720, for example, requires that all students receive admissions counseling, including advising on their remediation options.[46] Colleges can also require up-front advising prior to students registering for classes or meeting with an advisor at certain milestones, or both. Up-front advising should include career navigation support that incorporates career exploration as well as labor market information that illustrates regional career options. While these practices can benefit all students, it is especially important for underserved populations, for whom navigating the college environment poses additional challenges, and who may not be aware of their career options. For underserved populations, advisors many need targeted training. For example, advisors can help students with a criminal record or undocumented students who have received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status identify career options that will be open to them.

- **Incentivize the creation of campus resource centers that provide targeted supports for specific populations**

On-campus resource centers can provide supports tailored to the needs of particular groups of students. These centers can be run by the college or in partnership with local organizations. For example, undocumented immigrants may need assistance navigating both the

college itself and other systems. Immigrant students' needs range from assistance getting a driver's license or accessing health care to assistance navigating the Immigration and Naturalization Service and understanding their eligibility for DACA.[47] The California state assembly passed a bill to establish Dream Resource Centers or designated staff members at public colleges and universities to assist undocumented students with access to financial aid, academic counseling, legal services, and other supports.[48] In October 2015, the U.S. Department of Education released a resource guide for supporting undocumented youth in postsecondary settings; recommendations include providing training for faculty and staff working with undocumented students, and developing services and resources targeted to these students.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Implications for Postsecondary Education

In 2012, the Obama administration established the DACA program, which allows undocumented youth who were brought to the United States as children to apply for protection from deportation for two years at a time if they meet certain criteria such as being enrolled in or completing school or military service. At the time of writing, DACA recipients are granted "deferred action" from removal proceedings and granted a work authorization in the United States. At colleges and universities in some states (Massachusetts, Ohio, Virginia, Missouri, and Arizona) tuition for DACA recipients may be discounted to "in-state" rates. Currently, only half of the 700,000 individuals eligible for DACA have applied; many undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children are not eligible based on their age (current DACA rules only apply to those born after June 16, 1981). In addition, DACA applications and renewals require a fee that many cannot afford, especially families with multiple children.

#5 COMPREHENSIVE FINANCIAL AID

Make postsecondary education more affordable for underserved populations by ensuring access to in-state tuition, financial aid and scholarships, public benefits, and emergency funds.

Financial aid plays a critical role in making postsecondary education a viable opportunity. For underserved populations, many of whom are very low-income, the cost of postsecondary education is a major barrier to access and completion. For some, such as youth formerly in foster care, there are resources available to fund education and training, but figuring out how to access these resources may be confusing and overwhelming. Employers often provide tuition benefits that go unused, or are unrealistic unless colleges or employers can cover costs up front. A variety of federal policies limits the availability of aid for certain groups but, in many cases, states have the discretion to make state and local aid available to populations with limited access to financial aid.

Current Conditions

The availability of state and federal financial aid varies widely for the population groups discussed in this paper. Different aid sources also have different limitations on what they can pay for, which can be challenging for students who not only need aid for tuition but also for living expenses.

For students with a criminal record: Once released from prison, individuals with a criminal record are eligible to receive federal financial aid and loans, even if they are on probation or parole, with some exceptions for drug convictions and sexual offenses. While federal financial aid is largely available, access to state financial aid varies. In some states, students with a felony conviction are not eligible for state scholarships such as the TEXAS grant; in other cases, like the Georgia HOPE scholarship, only students with drug convictions are ineligible, and only for a limited time following the conviction.[49, 50]

For undocumented students: College affordability is a major concern for undocumented students; not only are they often required to pay out-of-state tuition, they are

unable to access federal financial aid. Undocumented students are generally able to enroll in college, though in some cases students must sign an affidavit stating intent to pursue legal status. Only two states—Alabama and South Carolina—prohibit undocumented immigrants from enrolling in public postsecondary institutions.[51]

For opportunity youth: FAFSA rules consider students to be independent for financial aid purposes when they are at least 24 years old, but many opportunity youth who are under 24 cannot count on parental support for postsecondary education.[52] Some may in fact be responsible for contributing to family income. These students will likely need additional assistance to ensure they are able to fill out the FAFSA and receive sufficient financial aid.

Policy Opportunities

Ensure that state aid programs do not inadvertently leave out underserved populations.

Many states and communities have scholarship and financial aid programs to encourage access to higher education for low-income students, such as "Promise" programs to make community college tuition free. However, many of these programs are limited to students who have recently graduated from high school, which leaves out non-traditional students who make up an increasingly large percentage of community college students.[53] Other programs require students to have graduated from specific high schools, which could pose a barrier for those who dropped out but have since earned a high school equivalency credential. States and regions should examine their aid programs to ensure that eligibility requirements do not exclude the students who would benefit most from financial assistance. In Tennessee, for example, the Tennessee Reconnect program is an equivalent of the Tennessee Promise program, but geared specifically to nontraditional students.[54]

Allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition and access state grants and loans

Many states have been able to amend in-state eligibility requirements in a way that allows undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition. As of 2015, at least 19 states had enacted provisions to allow undocumented students to access in-state tuition rates.[55] Most states require students to live in the state, to have attended high school in the state (for one to four years), and to have attained a high school diploma or equivalent. In some states, students must be DACA beneficiaries to qualify for in-state tuition. Currently, five states have also taken steps to extend eligibility for state grants and loans to undocumented students. Washington and Texas have created alternative applications for financial aid so that undocumented students don't have to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Other states allow undocumented students to access merit-based grants if they meet other eligibility requirements. In 2015, California lawmakers introduced a bill (which was not ultimately passed) to allow undocumented students to participate in state work-study programs.[56] States can follow these examples to forge policy that makes postsecondary education more affordable for undocumented students.

Create state guidance that facilitates uptake of Pell through Ability to Benefit

Given that many members of underserved populations lack a high school diploma, states should consider policies that facilitate entry into postsecondary programs without a high school credential. Some states prohibit enrollment in college courses without a high school credential. In other states, individual colleges may require a high school credential for college entry or for entry into specific programs. At the federal level, the Ability to Benefit provision for Pell Grants allows students without a high school credential to access federal financial aid for career pathway programs once they demonstrate their "ability to benefit from postsecondary education" by earning six college credits or passing an approved assessment exam, such as TABE or Accuplacer.[57] This federal policy has the potential to greatly accelerate entry into postsecondary education for those still working toward their high school equivalency, but many colleges need guidance on how to verify eligibility.

Create scholarships and/or tuition waivers for target populations such as immigrants and youth formerly in foster care

States and colleges should consider establishing either scholarships or tuition waivers targeted to specific underserved populations for whom affordability is a major barrier. Some states and colleges already offer

additional tuition discounts for veterans; this approach could be used with other populations as well. Twenty-eight states have tuition assistance for former foster care students. In addition to tuition assistance, states and colleges can provide stipends for books, supplies, and living expenses.

Create flexible and/or emergency aid funds

There is increasing recognition that college students, and especially nontraditional students, need financial assistance that goes beyond the cost of tuition. A common expression is that students are just one flat tire away from dropping out. Most financial aid is disbursed at the beginning of the semester, but emergencies can happen at any time. Because unexpected expenses have the potential to derail student progress, it is critical for colleges to offer expanded financial aid, including support that covers the costs of child care, transportation, and other common barriers, as well as emergency grants. These sources of aid need to be well publicized and easy to apply for. In 2015, Wisconsin passed legislation allocating $320,000 annually for emergency aid for low-income students; students can receive up to $500 for emergencies such as medical expenses or car repairs.[58]

Ensure that students are accessing public benefits where eligible

One component of expanded financial aid is helping students access public benefits such as WIOA training funds, food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP), TANF, child care assistance, and other sources of support. Many students may not be aware that they qualify for these benefits, which make a critical difference in providing students with the needed stability to persist in meeting their educational goals.

Many states and colleges are making it easier for individuals to assess eligibility for public benefits. For example, the Ohio Association of Foodbanks created the Ohio Benefit Bank™, which is an online tool for researching eligibility for benefits and filling out program applications. Delgado Community College in New Orleans partnered with Single Stop USA to create a campus-based center to help students figure out if they qualify for food stamps, child care subsidies, tax credits, or other resources. Between 2012 and 2014, Delgado's Single Stop center helped more than 5,600 individuals connect with over $8 million in public benefits, tax refunds, and services.[59]

Provide training for financial aid and advising departments on eligibility rules and available funding for specific populations

College admissions and financial aid departments need to be up to date on the financial aid policies that impact different population groups so that they are able to advise students on their options and process claims in a timely manner. Financial aid departments also need sufficient capacity to handle compliance with federal regulations and provide direct guidance to students.

Financial aid staff may need specific training in working with the many opportunity youth and individuals returning from incarceration who are homeless or in unstable housing situations. Unstable housing is of course a major barrier to persistence, one that is becoming more and more common. A 2015 Wisconsin Hope Lab survey of community college students found that 13 percent of those surveyed were homeless.[60] Unstable housing can make it more challenging to establish residency and apply for financial aid, among other problems. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 establishes that unaccompanied homeless youth qualify as independent students for the purposes of federal financial aid.[61] Financial aid officers may need additional professional development so they can feel comfortable making the independent student designation and discussing sensitive issues such as homelessness in a way that is not alienating to students.

#6 ROBUST CAREER PATHWAYS

Create robust career pathways with multiple exit and entry points as well as flexible learning options that help underserved populations balance work obligations and educational goals.

Many underserved students face critical challenges in balancing work and learning that make it essential for them to earn credentials with labor market value in an efficient way. Policy can promote robust career pathways that include stackable credentials, flexible learning options, and the ability to earn transferable credit and receive credit for prior learning or work experiences. Stackable credentials provide students with multiple

stop-out points along a postsecondary pathway and make it easier for students to access higher-paying jobs in a shorter timeframe. Transfer and credit for prior learning policies accelerate credential attainment for students who take classes at multiple institutions, as well as those who participate in on-the-job training. Flexible learning options also make it easier to balance educational and career goals and motivate students to stop out when needed rather than terminate their education.

Current Conditions

Historically, most postsecondary institutions have operated on the assumption that students attend full time during daytime hours and that they complete a degree program with no breaks. Many institutions—and community colleges in particular—have realized that students need more flexibility: they need to be able to occasionally stop out for employment or life events before returning to college. During the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) program provided numerous colleges and consortia across the country with much-needed capacity-building resources to identify stronger career pathways that include stackable credentials and opportunities for students to earn credit for prior learning. There has also been progress in improving statewide articulation and transfer agreements.

Along with career pathways, work-based learning has been promoted through the TAACCCT grants, Vice President Biden's 2014 Job-Driven Training report, and federal grants to expand apprenticeship models. WIOA provides further support for the development of career pathways and work-based learning across the workforce and education systems. Many of these initiatives have encouraged federal cross-agency collaboration and support that can be mirrored at the state level.

Despite this progress, there are still numerous barriers that make it difficult for students to complete their learning goals while juggling other responsibilities. Some of these barriers, such as erratic work schedules, are beyond the control of postsecondary policy, but there are ways that postsecondary institutions, as well as community partners and employers, can work together to ensure that underserved populations are able to make progress along a pathway.

Policy Opportunities

Promote the creation of pathways with multiple stackable credentials

States and colleges are increasingly focused on ensuring that career pathways include stackable credentials, defined by the U.S. Department of Labor as "a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual's qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs."[62] For underserved populations, as well as other students who may need to stop out of postsecondary education to find employment, stackable credentials make it easier to break a longer educational sequence into manageable pieces. For stackable credentials to be effective, each discrete credential needs to be embedded within a program of study leading to longer-term credentials or degrees. Stacking credentials has the added benefit of making the shorter-term programs eligible for federal financial aid.[63] States can create policies that require postsecondary institutions to offer stackable credentials and can also use funding to incentivize and support the development of stackable credentials.[64] Additionally, states can establish guidelines and approval processes for building stackable credentials, such as requiring employer input or approval, and can ensure that they are transferrable across institutions within the state.

Ensure labor market alignment of stackable credentials

In order to be effective, shorter-term credentials need to be tied to specific occupational areas. State policy can promote the development of robust stackable credential systems by encouraging or requiring colleges to demonstrate local or regional labor market demand, collaborate with industry, and use real-time labor market information to align programs with local labor demands. In Oregon, for example, short-term certificates must be aligned with the competencies required by employers for either entry-level jobs or career advancement.[65]

Establish robust transfer and prior learning assessment policies

Because the populations discussed in this paper are more likely to move from college to college, or move between college and work, they are likely to benefit from policies that facilitate credit transfer and credit for prior learning. For example, many immigrants, both documented and undocumented, come to the United

States with postsecondary credentials earned in their native country. It can be extremely challenging to have these foreign credentials—especially health care credentials—recognized by American employers and educational institutions.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) can be a valuable tool for immigrants as well as many other adult students. The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning has found that students who earn credit for prior learning are more likely to complete a credential, and it is working on ways to make prior learning easier to evaluate, transfer, and accept.[66] PLA can include portfolio review, challenge exams, standardized tests, and evaluations of corporate or military training. Depending on the level of college autonomy, states can either establish a system-wide policy for assessing and granting credit for prior learning, or they can direct colleges to do so. Some states have also established policies for promoting greater awareness and uptake of PLA; for example, Oregon and Washington have passed legislation that requires the higher education system to create goals for increasing student participation in PLA.[67] To advance equity goals, states and colleges could similarly set participation goals for specific population groups.

Facilitate transfer of credits earned during incarceration

For the small number of inmates who do participate in postsecondary training, limitations on credit transfer make it challenging to continue a program of study after release. Inmates are frequently transferred between prisons and are not necessarily incarcerated in or near the communities they will return to after release. States can ensure that those who start their education while incarcerated are able to continue along a program of study after release by requiring that postsecondary education delivered in prisons be offered for credit and by enacting robust transfer and articulation policies. In North Carolina, the Community College System Office ensures that college classes delivered in prison are equivalent to on-campus offerings.[68] In New Jersey, which participates in the Vera Institute of Justice's Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project, the state's transfer policy ensures that credits earned through partnerships between the prison system and local community colleges can be transferred to any two-year institution in the state.[69]

Expand access to work-based learning for underserved populations

Work-based learning refers to a variety of strategies for blending work and learning, including internships, co-ops, subsidized on-the-job training, work-based courses, and apprenticeships. Some of the major benefits of work-based learning include making learning more relevant by directly connecting it with real-world skills, promoting greater alignment of training with employer needs, giving students direct work experience, and, in some cases, allowing students to earn a paycheck while they are earning credits toward a degree. Paid work-based learning is especially important to students from underserved populations who must earn an income while in college. Greater access to work-based learning could help these students gain relevant work experience as well as income while working on a postsecondary credential.

Create or promote policies that support working learners

Stackable credentials are an important tool for helping students obtain higher-paying employment, but students often struggle to continue their education once they have entered the labor market. There are a variety of ways that states, colleges, and employers can make it easier for students to balance education and employment. Colleges can offer more evening and weekend classes to accommodate working learners. Online courses can also be a good option for making education more accessible, especially when paired with intensive academic and other support services. Employers can make it easier to balance work and learning through tuition advancement, direct payment to a college, or reimbursement. Employers can also work with states and through community-based organizations to structure tuition benefits that are easy to access and do not require up-front payment from students; these options should, ideally, be aligned with career advancement opportunities. Employers can give workers steadier work schedules; for many underserved populations who need to work while enrolled in postsecondary education, unpredictable scheduling makes persistence nearly impossible. Some states and cities are now passing scheduling bills to address this issue.

#7 BRAIDED FUNDING

Promote and facilitate the use of braided funding to increase the resources available for underserved populations.

Many of the programmatic interventions—such as intensive student supports—that improve outcomes for underserved populations are resource-intensive. Because most colleges and states cannot rely on one or two major sources of funding to support and sustain new and innovative programs, they must pull from multiple smaller sources, each with specific goals, target populations, and performance indicators. Braided funding leverages federal, state, and private funds by "braiding" them together to support both programmatic strategies and participating students. Policies that make additional resources available, or facilitate the braiding of different federal, state, or institutional funding streams, can help colleges better meet the needs of underserved populations.

Current Conditions

Colleges often focus on a narrow subset of federal funding streams, such as Title IV or Perkins, even though there are multiple funding sources that can support postsecondary education and training activities. Understanding the various funding streams that apply to each target population can open access to new resources that cover critical costs, including tuition and fees as well as the provision of services.

For example, the passage of WIOA has major implications for efforts to serve opportunity youth. The new law requires that 75 percent of WIOA Youth Services funds be spent on out-of-school youth and increases the maximum age of eligibility for these funds from 21 years to 24 years. These changes provide states and programs with additional resources for serving opportunity youth.

Other funding sources relevant to underserved populations include SNAP (many low-income students may qualify for food stamps) as well as SNAP Education and Training funds and TANF. These funding sources can help defray the cost of education for students, provide financial assistance to cover living expenses, and also fund the development and provision of programs.

Policy Opportunities

- **Establish cross-agency partnerships to identify braided funding opportunities**

Braided funding requires collaboration across the different entities that provide services to each population, such as secondary education, postsecondary education, social services, and workforce development. States can establish braided funding committees that bring together representatives from multiple agencies, organizations, and industries to assess opportunities for braided funding that lead to greater efficiency; this could entail streamlining similar services, such as case management, that are provided by multiple sources. These committees also can assess whether there are state policy obstacles (real or perceived) to braiding funds across programs and agencies, and suggest policy changes accordingly. State braided funding committees can lay the groundwork for braided funding work at the local level. On a regional level, cross-sector collaboratives focused on improving outcomes for opportunity youth, such as the 23 communities in the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, use collaborative partners from across sectors to identify ways to braid funding for pathways to credentials for this population.

- **Leverage federal funding to enhance supportive services**

Many students from underserved populations require a more intensive level of services than traditional students. Opportunity youth, for example, need access to a wide range of basic supports, including health care, housing, and transportation, as well as supportive networks.[70] These populations may also be eligible for a broader array of financial supports beyond basic financial aid (such as targeted resources for youth in foster care, veterans, individuals with disabilities, or English language learners), but accessing these funds is not always common practice for colleges.

State partnerships can enable more creative and effective uses of funding streams. The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative is a partnership between the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Workforce Services, which oversees the TANF block grant. The program model provides participants with access to in-demand career pathway programs, academic and

supportive services, and resources to cover tuition and fees as well as the costs of child care and transportation. Since 2006, more than 28,000 participants have enrolled in the program, earning over 26,000 credentials.[71]

Another under-utilized funding stream is SNAP Employment and Training. These funds can be used to support a variety of education and training activities as well as supportive services. Washington is one of the few states that fully takes advantage of this funding stream: since 2006, the $29 million Basic Food Employment & Training (BFET) program has served over 28,000 individuals across community colleges and community-based organizations.[72] BFET funding covers a variety of services including vocational education (often provided by community colleges), basic education, job search, childcare, and transportation.

#8 CAPACITY BUILDING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Build the capacity of colleges and partner organizations to test and scale innovations for improving postsecondary success for underserved populations.

Many of the policies and practices that will make a difference for underserved populations are challenging to implement and require both collaboration and creativity. Colleges likely need incentives to make changes and professional development for how to implement best practices correctly. A statewide approach to continuous improvement, especially one that is driven by analysis of outcomes data, policy, and practice, is critical for improving the success rates of underserved populations.

▸ **Federal Funding Streams and Potential Uses** (Adapted from JFF's Braided Funding Toolkit)

		WIOA Title 1 Adults	WIOA Title 1 Youth	WIOA Title 2	Wagner-Peyser	TANF Block Grant	SNAP E&T	CSBG	SSBG	TRIO	Voc. Rehab	Post-9/11 GI Bill	Res. ED	Survivors & Dep.	Pell Grants
Programmatic Elements	Navigators or Success Coaches					X									
	Academic Supports (tutoring, etc.)	X	X	X		X	X	X		X					
	Student Support Services (childcare, transportation)	X	X				X	X	X						
	Tuition & Fees	X	X				X					X	X	X	X
	Intake & Assessment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X				
	Advising & Case Management	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X				
	Career Coaching & Job Search	X	X		X		X	X	X		X				
	Job Placement	X	X		X		X	X	X		X				

Current Conditions

While the charge to improve student success has been made increasingly clear, the methods for doing so remain uncertain. This uncertainty derives in part from a lack of statewide structures for incentivizing innovation, sharing best practices, and providing professional development. Many states have started using outcomes-based funding to encourage colleges to focus on specific outcome metrics, such as course completion or credential attainment, but often without providing guidance on how to achieve these improved outcomes and what resources may be available to affect them.

Policy Opportunities

Provide incentives to pilot innovative models and scale successful practices

State policy can create incentives for colleges to test and adopt practices with the potential to improve outcomes for underserved populations. One common approach is performance-based funding, which rewards colleges for achieving various outcome measures, such as whether students attain predetermined milestones. As noted earlier, states can use performance funding to incent colleges to focus services on certain groups of students by weighting some groups more heavily than others. Massachusetts, for example, weights at-risk students (generally defined as those receiving Pell Grants) more highly in its performance funding calculations, which means colleges receive additional funds when these students hit predetermined milestones.[73] States can also create non-financial incentives for changing practice by conferring special status on colleges that adopt specific practices or demonstrate strong outcomes for targeted populations.

Engage colleges in data-driven continuous improvement processes

States can build colleges' capacity to examine student data and develop interventions to address achievement gaps. In Illinois, the Pathways to Results process uses data analysis to drive continuous improvement at community colleges. Through the process, teams examine student-level outcomes disaggregated by race, gender, income, and other characteristics, and identify equity gaps. The teams then examine institutional processes that may be contributing to the equity gaps, with the goal of determining root causes. Colleges then pilot potential solutions to the identified problems, evaluate the results, and engage in review and reflection.[74]

Provide technical assistance and professional development on addressing the needs of underserved populations

Simply requiring or encouraging colleges to improve outcomes for underserved populations is not sufficient; most colleges will need guidance and training in order to adopt new policies and practices. States can dedicate funding to providing professional development to faculty and staff on the unique needs of underserved populations and best practices for addressing those needs. For example, given the complexity of financial aid availability for underserved populations, states should provide professional development to financial aid and admissions departments in the areas of federal and state financial aid policies, strategies for connecting underserved populations with financial resources, and strategies for communicating this information across a campus and community.

Advisors and support services staff would also benefit from professional development on the barriers specific to underserved populations, strategies to mitigate those barriers, and sensitivity training to ensure they treat students fairly and equitably. For example, as part of its Career Pathways Initiative, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education conducts poverty simulations for college and human services agencies to help staff better understand the issues their students and clients face on a day-to-day basis. The U.S. Department of Education's resource guide on serving undocumented immigrants suggests training all frontline staff on critical policies such as DACA so that they can better respond to student requests; similarly, frontline staff should be aware of the major policies impacting other underserved populations, or be able to direct students to appropriate information and resources.[75]

Conclusion

Postsecondary policy is a critical lever for increasing underserved populations' access to economic opportunity. As described in this paper, there are multiple and emerging ways that states can use policy to drive structural changes that improve outcomes for underserved populations. States can create much-needed infrastructure to support and expand effective programmatic models. Much of this work is already happening through statewide efforts to create and scale guided pathways and related credentialing efforts. For the pathways movement to serve as a vehicle for equity and mobility, policymakers must also ensure that policy takes into account the unique needs and experiences of these underserved populations.

Over the past decade, states have made great strides in improving college access and completion, and the growing focus on student success, rather than enrollment, has been a welcome and much-needed change. Slowly, we are starting to see improvements in getting students through remedial sequences, into credit-bearing coursework, through programs of study to earn valuable credentials, and ultimately into the labor market. Now we must make sure that these positive changes impact all students, and especially those who are currently underrepresented and underserved in higher education. The underserved populations discussed in this paper, as well as others—young men of color, older workers, students with disabilities, veterans, and English language learners—comprise a large and growing proportion of our nation's workforce, and it is imperative that our efforts to improve postsecondary outcomes do not leave them behind. We cannot be satisfied with general improvements in postsecondary completion if this means inadvertently widening achievement gaps and decreasing economic opportunity for those who need it most.

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