

Lessons in Leadership and Governance

Structures and Commitments for Scaling Regional College and Career Pathways Systems

Author: Leah Moschella, Associate Director, JFF

Introduction

In our rapidly changing and unpredictable economy, young people need both cross-cutting skills and specialized knowledge to thrive. States and regions need a workforce that is ready to adapt to new industry realities. Business leaders require diverse and skilled talent to innovate and grow. While occupations and economies will continue to shift, college and career pathways can effectively prepare young people and communities to succeed in the ever-evolving economy.

College and career pathways strategies build thriving regional and state economies dedicated to economic advancement for all citizens.¹ They help young people explore college and career options, set clear goals for their futures, and access the supports they need to achieve their goals. They help employers build a talent pipeline of diverse young professionals who have the skills they need to contribute to and lead the workforce. Pathways help young people access the knowledge, skills, credentials, social connections, and confidence to launch and advance in high-demand, high-paying careers. These strategies help create opportunities for economic advancement, making them especially powerful for students of color, experiencing poverty, and those facing other systemic barriers to their academic and career success.

Implementing college and career pathways requires deep collaboration among stakeholders across K-12 and higher education, industry, workforce development, and government. While these partners come to this work with differing perspectives, they must commit to shared outcomes for young people and economies. Bringing partners together, building a collective vision, and scaling college and career pathways systems requires strong, organized, and collaborative systems of leadership and governance with intentional commitments.

Key Lessons in Leadership and Governance from the Great Lakes Region

Through the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership, four communities across the Great Lakes region—Central Ohio; the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago; Rockford, Illinois; and Madison, Wisconsin—are building high-quality college and career pathways that equip all students to thrive in college, careers, and beyond. GLCCPP especially aims to support students from historically marginalized and underrepresented communities in building the knowledge, skills, and connections for their future success.

Through GLCCPP, these four communities developed strong systems for leadership and governance to scale and sustain their college and career pathways. Each community established committees of cross-sector stakeholders to build sustainable, industry-aligned, secondary-to-postsecondary pathways in their region. The work of partners from across the GLCCPP communities shows that there is no one-size fits-all approach, but there are important structures and commitments that contribute to strong leadership and governance systems. This report highlights five structures and four commitments that are essential in a strong leadership and governance system that establishes and accelerates support for college and career pathways at scale.

A Note About the COVID-19 Pandemic

The work of the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership highlighted in this report was completed before the COVID-19 crisis. While the pandemic has caused dramatic shifts in our economy, labor market, and education, JFF believes that the lessons about strong leadership in this report continue to hold true regardless of the specific public health and economic environments. Structured, cohesive, and committed leadership will help organizations move beyond the current crisis and continue to reimagine the opportunities education can open for all young people.

Strong college and career pathways leadership and governance systems establish structures that include:

Commitment from senior-level leaders



This includes senior leaders from across K-12 and postsecondary education, employers, workforce and economic development, and the community. Senior-level leaders form an executive leadership committee and develop a shared vision for how to catalyze ideas into common goals among members. The committee also establishes an organizational structure and develops dedicated funding, supports for stable staffing, and a formalized agreement to operationalize leadership in support of this collective vision. The executive leadership committee also amplifies the shared work across stakeholders and strives to convene diverse stakeholders and organizations around a common agenda.

Strategic representation from across education, workforce development, and economic development systems



Cross-sector stakeholders come together to form an operational leadership committee. They dedicate time to collaborating across systems to implement the executive committee's plan for regional alignment, success, and continuous improvement.

Data systems



The executive and operational leadership committees share responsibility for continued learning and improvement using data. This requires collecting, sharing, and reviewing data to inform decision making on a regular basis and setting benchmark goals to monitor progress.

Shared messaging



Partners use consistent messaging to communicate the regional plan for implementing and scaling pathways. Messaging is designed to reach a diverse set of stakeholders—including families and students—and supports public goodwill building and accountability.

A work-based learning intermediary



Intermediaries promote high-quality and intentional work-based learning experiences for all students. The intermediary—or intermediary functions shared among partners—engages employers through a well-developed database, monitors the supply and demand of opportunities, and supports infrastructure that promotes sustained collaboration between educators and employers.

Strong leadership and governance systems make intentional commitments to:

A collective focus on equity and access

Strong leadership and governance systems hold themselves accountable for equitable outcomes. Leaders of college and career pathways commit to setting and achieving data-informed goals that allocate resources, funding, and wraparound services to effectively support students who face systemic barriers.

IN ACTION

Central Ohio’s Southwestern City School District is one of Ohio’s largest school districts with urban, suburban, and rural contexts within its 120-mile boundary. In Southwestern City Schools, 60 percent of students are economically disadvantaged and nearly 3,000 students are English language learners. Through the support of a five-year Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the district set and is working toward a goal that 90 percent of students will graduate with college credit or an industry-recognized credential by 2020. Southwestern City School District students benefit from Ohio’s College Credit Plus programming, which offers college-level courses free of charge to students in grades 7 to 12. The district created an Accelerated Learning Center that offers a cohort-based model and wraparound services to provide high school students with the supports needed to access and succeed in college-level coursework.²

Systems for accountability and co-design across stakeholders

Regular meetings and signed memorandums of understanding establish the conditions for building trust. Convening leaders identify priority areas and communicate clear opportunities for stakeholders across secondary, postsecondary, business and industry, and economic development to support the design and outcomes of college and career pathways. Stakeholders collaboratively develop benchmarks and metrics to achieve high-priority goals.

IN ACTION

In **Madison, Wisconsin**, the Experiential Learning Leadership Committee organized an industry council that meets regularly to share opportunities, develop benchmarks, and report on successful strategies to implement and scale work-based learning opportunities for high school districts. Employers and industry leaders can take a clear and defined role in work-based learning events offered by the school district, and each work-based learning opportunity has clearly defined outcomes and an evaluation process. Information is tracked through a shared online portal to maintain consistent communication across stakeholders.

Collaborative data review

This enables multiple stakeholders to see and understand data across multiple systems. Successful leadership and governance systems take collective ownership of outcomes, support integration of data systems, and set benchmarks and metrics that are informed by multiple data sources.

IN ACTION

In the **Northwest Suburbs of Chicago, Illinois**, the Northwest Educational Council for Student Success serves as an intermediary. NECSS manages a data platform that monitors students' progress as they enroll in and complete dual credit courses. The data is shared across the convening leadership at the secondary, postsecondary, and intermediary levels. Stakeholders collaboratively review data and set realistic quantitative goals to increase access to dual enrollment courses, and plan interventions to support equitable outcomes across all demographics. Committee members meet regularly to review progress and assess strategies collectively.³

Engaging community members

Strong leaders intentionally engage the community to increase awareness of the importance and benefits of college and career pathways and to generate enthusiasm for pathways among students, families, and educators. Benchmarks are set by convening leadership committees to implement a strategic communication and messaging plan that clarifies opportunities for young people, caregivers, community-based organizations, and civic leaders to support college and career pathways movements.

IN ACTION

In **Rockford, Illinois**, convening leadership across secondary and postsecondary education and industry partners created a clearly articulated “profile of a graduate” that defines the skills, knowledge, and experiences that a graduate from Rockford Public Schools embodies upon high school completion. This definition of college, career, and community readiness is shared with community-based organizations and businesses engaged in work-based learning to increase collective understanding of the benefits. Business leaders and community-based organizations use this profile to better provide outcomes- and work-based learning and out-of-school experiences that are directly aligned with the career-readiness definition developed by Rockford Public Schools.⁴ For example, community-based organizations use it to better work with students during out-of-school activities and summer jobs, while business leaders use it to focus on outcomes as they design work-based learning experiences.

Conclusion

Strong leadership and governance systems in college and career pathways effectively engage stakeholders across secondary and postsecondary education and industry at multiple levels of commitment. They communicate a clear vision that is collectively developed by a committee of executive-level decision makers. This vision is translated into a data-driven strategy by an operational committee dedicated to the implementation and alignment of college and career pathways across sectors and educational systems. A formalized work-based learning intermediary supports the infrastructure necessary to monitor an equitable distribution of opportunities across industry and education. These governance systems reinforce one another and augment the operation of work-based learning, accelerated academics, and college and career advising for all students.

To sustain and scale college and career pathways, successful leaders commit to focusing on equity, building trusting relationships across stakeholders, using data-informed decision making, and engaging community members. These structures and strategies enable communities like those in the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership to not only implement but sustain and scale college and career pathways that effectively prepare young people with the skills, credentials, and confidence to succeed in the evolving economy.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Joyce Foundation for investing in the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership. We also thank our partners Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois and ConnectED: The National Center for College & Career, and especially Jon Furr, Emily Rusca, and Julie Koenke for their deep collaboration in this work. We also thank the four GLCCPP communities—Central Ohio; the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago; Rockford, Illinois; and Madison, Wisconsin—for their commitment to the young people of the Great Lakes region.

Thank you to Isabel Present for conducting the research and developing the initial framing that shaped and informed this report, and to Kyle Hartung, Taylor Maag, and Kimberly Perrella for contributing to the conceptualization and editing of the piece.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all.

www.jff.org

About the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership

Funded by the Joyce Foundation, the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership supports four Great Lakes communities—Central Ohio; the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago; Rockford, Illinois; and Madison, Wisconsin—in building high-quality college and career pathways that equip students to thrive in college, careers, and beyond. The partnership especially focuses on serving historically marginalized students and underrepresented groups.

www.glccpp.com

Endnotes

- ¹ *College and Career Pathways: A Strategy for State Economic Success* (Boston: JFF, November 2018), https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/College_and_Career_Pathways-_A_Strategy_for_State_Economic_Success.pdf.
- ² Sheila Jackson and Sarah Hooker, *Waves Of Change: Adapting District Strategy and Culture to Prepare All Students for the Future* (Boston: JFF, December 2019), https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Columbus_State_Brief_final.pdf.
- ³ Kyle Hartung and Michael Grady, *A Clearer Path to College and Career Success: The Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership* (Boston: JFF, May 2019), <https://www.jff.org/resources/clearer-path-college-and-career-success-great-lakes/>.
- ⁴ *College and Career Pathways: A Strategy for State Economic Success*, https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/College_and_Career_Pathways-_A_Strategy_for_State_Economic_Success.pdf.