

Better Connecting Secondary to Postsecondary Education

Lessons and Policy Recommendations from the Great Lakes

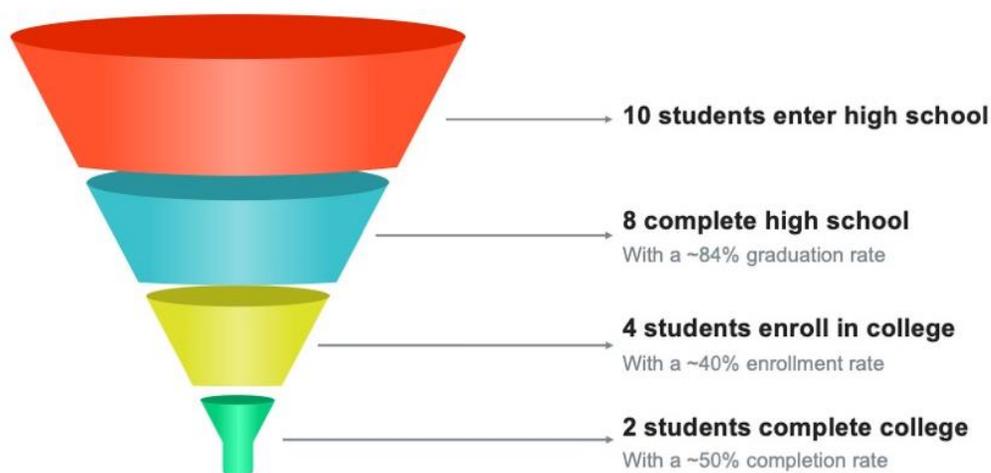
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Introduction

The secondary-to-postsecondary transition is a critically important step on a student’s path toward economic success. [The majority of jobs in our nation continue to require some sort of postsecondary attainment](#), whether that be a bachelor’s degree, associate’s degree, or other college coursework. Unfortunately, our nation still loses students as they progress through secondary and postsecondary education (*see Secondary to Postsecondary Education Funnel below*). Further, this problem disproportionately affects students of color, particularly Black and Latinx students, who [are 20 percent less likely than other students](#) to earn a college-level credential.

Secondary to Postsecondary Education Funnel



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

The COVID-19 pandemic has created extreme disruption in our nation's K-12 and postsecondary education systems—and for the students navigating them, exacerbating historic disparities in high school graduation and in making seamless transitions into college and careers. Additionally, the pandemic has intensified economic insecurities for many families, as unemployment—especially among young adults—has skyrocketed. These disruptions heightened the need for modernized delivery of education and increased the need for transitional supports to help students complete their secondary education and seamlessly transition to college.

The Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership (GLCCPP) leadership recognizes that it is more important than ever to think intentionally about solutions that ensure that students—specifically those that have historically been underserved by our education systems—get the opportunities they need to successfully progress through education systems and into the workforce. To ensure that all students have access to the postsecondary opportunities that meet their needs and can help them progress on their pathways, secondary and postsecondary education systems must work together to build better connections that help students more seamlessly transition to college and careers.

The Importance of Practitioner-Informed Policy

Across the country, there is consensus that we must better prepare all young people to succeed in college and career. GLCCPP, launched in 2016 by the Joyce Foundation, aims to create and expand high-quality college and career pathways to advance equity and economic mobility for young people in the Great Lakes region.

Through GLCCPP, four communities in the northwest suburbs of Chicago; Rockford, Illinois; Madison, Wisconsin; and central Ohio are taking unique approaches to strengthen college and career pathways, grounded in a shared commitment to equity, collaboration, and sustainability. They draw upon national best practices and strategies to achieve [three quality indicators](#): (1) strong leadership and governance structures, (2) seamless alignment of students' academic and career preparation across high school and college experiences, and (3) systems that provide equitable access to work-based learning to connect youth to the world of work.

This brief presents the unique vantage point of education and workforce development practitioners who are working on the ground across GLCCPP communities to design and implement college and career pathways and are experiencing firsthand policy successes and barriers. This brief offers practitioner-informed state policy recommendations for how to strengthen alignment between secondary and postsecondary education to remove barriers to student transitions and success in college and careers.

Specifically, the brief calls on state policymakers to commit to college and career preparedness and hold systems accountable to achieving these goals. State policy can and should set the expectation that every student will be able to graduate from high school with an industry-recognized credential and college-level credits—and ensure these early college and career experiences will articulate and stack together along the college and career pathway of the student’s choosing. State policies must also promote the availability of career opportunities for all students—particularly students and youth from low-income families and those from traditionally under-resourced school districts.

Below are detailed recommendations, informed by GLCCPP practitioners, for policymakers to pursue in order to ensure that youth and young adults have access to postsecondary education experiences that will help them advance in college and their careers.

Key State Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Bolster System Alignment

States should take intentional steps to more deeply and thoughtfully align and structure pathways that start in high school and produce equitable college and career outcomes for students. This includes students’ entry into postsecondary education, seamless transfers into desired programs of study, on-time attainment of postsecondary credentials of value, and successful entry into the workforce. State policy should support and encourage unified college and career readiness strategies across secondary and postsecondary education and employment, with a focus on the following:

- **Encourage career readiness as a core component of accountability for K-12 education.** States need to adjust high school accountability standards and metrics by embracing career readiness as a core goal. Currently, the K-12 educational system focuses primarily on traditional college preparation, including using standardized testing to measure student and school performance. While this is still valuable, it does not fully account for student needs to succeed in the labor market. Accountability systems should be reformed to emphasize career readiness and encourage the K-12 system to prepare students for success in other high-quality postsecondary options, such as apprenticeship.
- **Increase data access and transparency to ensure that education and employer partners, policymakers, and students have actionable information on college and career pathways.** Access to outcome data is critically important not only to inform student choice but also to help secondary and postsecondary education work together to ensure that pathways programs align with labor market demand. States

can promote these strong partnerships through investments in longitudinal data systems and research capacity, as well as through model partnership agreements or memoranda of understanding (MOUs). Through these data systems, students' progress should be tracked through high school, college, and careers and results should be disaggregated based on student demographics to uncover key differences. States should turn the data into useful information and publicly release findings regularly. A routine flow of actionable information enables secondary and postsecondary education and employers to improve the design of pathways, strengthen their alignment across systems, and develop targeted strategies to close equity gaps.

- **Strengthen regional and statewide articulation agreements to ensure that college and career-focused credit and credentials attained in high school transfer to postsecondary institutions.** State policies should foster greater collaboration among secondary and postsecondary institutions in crafting pathways that provide students with a coherent three-to-four-year program of study aligned to academic and industry-specific technical standards as well as postsecondary requirements and credentials. These pathways should be formalized through articulation agreements among all school districts and colleges operating in the same regional labor market. Doing so will ensure that college-level credits and industry-recognized certificates earned while in high school can be transferred and will satisfy postsecondary program requirements. States can catalyze greater collaboration and alignment by supporting the development of model pathways and requiring formal partnership agreements and MOUs across secondary and postsecondary systems.

State Example: Illinois

Illinois has achieved significant milestones in its efforts to expand dual-credit access and offerings across the state with the adoption of a model partnership agreement, created by the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Community College Board. This agreement guides local partnerships between school districts and community colleges necessary for the successful implementation of quality dual-credit courses and related student supports. Under the state's Dual Credit Quality Act, if a school district and community college cannot agree on the terms of a local partnership, the school district and community college must default to a model partnership agreement adopted by the state. This demonstrates the importance of building formal partnerships between secondary and postsecondary education to ensure that students can access high-quality programming and are able to seamlessly transition without increased barriers from systems and institutions.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen On-Ramps Toward Postsecondary Credentials and Careers

Trends are continuing to show that high school students, youth, and young adults need to acquire high-value skills and credentials in a more affordable and efficient manner so they can enter the labor market more quickly and with less debt during a time of immense financial distress. State policy needs to scale acceleration strategies that ensure every young adult, regardless of their prior academic achievement, can enter and succeed in college and in the workforce. This can be achieved through the following policy measures:

- **Ensure that every high school student has an opportunity to earn college credits while in high school.** Expanding access to and success in “college in high school” experiences—such as dual credit, concurrent enrollment, and early college high schools—is an essential strategy for boosting the attainment of postsecondary credentials and preparing young adults for career success. These programs are proven and popular, but there is work to be done to ensure that there is equitable access to opportunities for high school students to earn college credits, that the programs students are participating in are high quality, and that students are able to persist and complete such programs. States should promote these opportunities while ensuring that they are valuable experiences—meaning that college learning is aligned to the student’s pathway, and that it provides career and technical education exposure and credits as well as gateway college courses. States should also ensure that counseling and counseling partnerships across systems are promoted so students understand what their credits mean and how to translate their competencies as they progress along their pathway. Lastly, states should invest in these programs to help districts and colleges pay for, retain, and expand the teacher base while also removing cost as a barrier and increasing the number of students who can participate.
- **Ensure that high school students have the opportunity and support needed to earn an industry-recognized certificate of value by graduation.** State policies can help ensure that all students graduate high school with a credential that prepares them for work and careers and that counts as college credit in their desired field of study. To ensure that these credentials are of value, the education sectors will have to collaborate and partner with industry to determine which certificates to offer and how to deliver career and technical education and other career-oriented programming. Additionally, prior-learning assessments should be offered by postsecondary institutions in order to determine credit based on a student’s knowledge and experience.
- **Scale evidence-based remediation approaches.** State policies should help students avoid having to complete remedial coursework in subjects like English and math before beginning their postsecondary program of study. States can do so through

strategies that accelerate students' entrance into college-level courses as quickly as is appropriate. Strategies include but are not limited to the following:

- Supporting the widespread use of [high school transition courses](#), which, upon their successful completion, guarantee a student's placement into college-level courses.
- Curtailing the reliance on high-stakes exams to determine a student's readiness for college-level courses and, instead, adopt [multiple measures](#) such as high school G.P.A. for assessment and placement .
- Redesigning developmental education by scaling the use of corequisite models that enable students lacking some academic skills to enroll in college-level math and English courses that provide extra tutoring support.
- Integrating basic skills education and job-specific training to strengthen [on-ramps](#) to postsecondary education for youth and adults without a high school credential.

States can catalyze the scaling of these models through policy mandates, technical assistance, and capacity-building investments.

State Example: Ohio

Ohio's College Credit Plus (CCP) program, which launched in 2015, helps students earn college and high school credits simultaneously by taking college courses from community colleges or universities while still enrolled in high school. The statewide dual enrollment program is open to all public school students who wish to attend a public university or college in Ohio, and participation is free for these individuals. It is an accelerated learning model that offers a variety of academic opportunities and aims to increase college readiness. CCP had seen an increase in summer and fall enrollments for 2019, and spring 2020 enrollments were expected to grow similarly.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked unprecedented disruptions for the program in March 2020. Fortunately, flexibility on the part of state leaders allowed students to select a pass/fail grading option and the state modified enrollment requirements for new program participants. These changes allowed for increased student participation and performance. While this flexibility helped students continue to access and enroll in this program, to ensure that CCP is reaching all Ohio youth, a work group has been tasked with examining student eligibility requirements and how they relate to participation of students of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Recommendation 3: Provide Personalized Supports to Improve Student Success

Redesigning systems and implementing acceleration strategies is not enough. Students need personalized support to guide their college and career decisions. This includes access to high-quality college and career counseling and advising systems that support individualized college and career planning and that deploy individualized support based on each student's unique needs and goals. These comprehensive advising and counseling services are needed to ensure that students and youth persist in and complete their programs. To bolster personalized support structures, policymakers should do the following:

- **Foster shared advising approaches, including career navigation and counseling services.** College and career pathways rely on a smooth transition between secondary and postsecondary experiences. Yet, in traditional approaches to academic and career advising, high schools and colleges operate in isolation, limiting their ability to help students make a smooth transition. State policies can break down these siloes by encouraging or providing incentives for programs that embed college counselors in high schools. This strategy of shared advising can also help to inform students about the variety of postsecondary options (e.g., two- and four-year degree programs) and about work-based learning opportunities and short-term credential programs that are industry-aligned and result in in-demand credentials.
- **Ensure that guidance counselors and students have access to education and employment outcome data.** Students need access to reliable and timely information about growing career fields and postsecondary programs that yield strong labor market returns. States can guide these college and career decisions by developing tech-enabled career navigation tools that leverage insights from longitudinal data sets as well as real-time labor market intelligence. The navigation system should be mobile and user-friendly so that exploring career options is part of people's daily habits. In addition, states should ensure that counselors, teachers, and mentors all have access to career information, so the adults that youth are closest with are able to educate and inform them about their career options.
- **Invest in virtual career navigation solutions.** Virtual advising can remove a major obstacle of inherent bias in providing students with college and career advising advice. Drawing on artificial intelligence, virtual counseling can also pull real-time information and updates from sources like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, state workforce development systems, and job pages for businesses and colleges. States should consider establishing a technology development fund to enhance this work.
- **Invest in other out-of-school supports that are key to students' success.** Out-of-school supports can be key to young people's ability to successfully transition from

secondary to postsecondary education. These services—such as tutoring, mentoring, or other social engagements that build their social capital—may not be available in the classroom but are needed to ensure students’ progress along their educational and career pathways. Such services not only provide students with the networks they need for support but also allow them to make connections that can inform their college and career choices. Because these support services are critical to student success, states should increase investments in such efforts to help connect youth to members of the community who can help them transition into the postsecondary world.

- **Encourage the completion of financial aid applications before high school graduation.** Affordability remains a barrier to college access and success and states should ensure that youth from all backgrounds understand their postsecondary financing options. States can help facilitate the financial aid process by setting an expectation, if not a requirement, that students will fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) before they graduate from high school. To encourage school districts to prioritize FAFSA completion, states should provide incentives such as training and support for high school counselors and staff members charged with helping students and families through the application process.

Regional Example: The Northwest Suburbs of Chicago

After years of confusion and frustration among students and parents over the many choices and barriers confronting them when considering postsecondary education, districts in the northwest suburbs of Chicago established the position of postsecondary transition advisor. The main purpose of this role is to serve as a connector between secondary and postsecondary education and help students navigate this transition. As part of this role’s responsibility, the transition advisor develops an academic map that meets the specific needs of each student and follows up with those who need additional support as identified by faculty and staff members. They also collaborate closely with high school counselors and postsecondary institutions’ career and counseling offices to clarify information about policies, procedures, academic programs, and other services the colleges offer.

The role establishes a shared accountability across systems and puts the individual first to ensure that students are able to make informed choices and seamlessly transition to postsecondary education. Although the region recognizes the importance of this position, financial support continues to be an issue. The school districts are working together to ensure that this role continues and that they can expand staffing to ensure that all students are able to receive the individualized support they need for success.

Call to Action

When secondary and postsecondary systems are better connected, students have a greater chance of making seamless transitions and finding success along their pathways. The economic downturn that resulted from the pandemic made many young people across our nation reconsider which postsecondary option might be right for them, as they looked for education and training opportunities that would lead to employment and a living wage at a time of financial distress.

Policy-based solutions can help ensure that systems are meeting the needs of students and youth, support greater alignment and partnerships across education, promote the scaling and adoption of acceleration strategies, and ensure that every student and young person has the support necessary for success. This moment presents opportunities for policymakers to redouble their efforts to support students' transitions to college and careers and put in place policy guidance, resources, and infrastructure to support individuals along their pathways.

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