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FutureReady States Profile: Connecticut

Lumina™ FOUNDATION

FUTUREREADY STATES

Intro

As home to renowned private universities and state institutions, Connecticut has long equated student success with a four-year degree. Here, as in most states, shorter routes into the workforce—either directly from high school or through a credential program or apprenticeship—have generally been perceived as lesser paths by educators, students, parents, and policymakers.

But that perception has been shifting lately. In fact, the state increasingly sees the college-for-all philosophy as a limiting paradigm—a view reflected in its recent efforts to create an array of robust education and training paths that lead to good jobs.

With a growing number of opportunities in advanced manufacturing, health care, and biosciences, employers are struggling to avoid a looming skills gap as experienced workers retire. The state also has set ambitious targets for growing its technology and innovation economy, with particular focus on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, green jobs, and quantum technology.

Through its updated Governor's Statewide Workforce Strategy, Connecticut is working to bring more structure to an unwieldy collection of credential programs. The goal is to expand residents' access to high-wage, in-demand careers and ensure that businesses have the skilled talent they need to thrive. Among the first steps in this effort is a push to create common standards that community colleges, independent career and technical centers, and other short-term credential providers use to ensure program quality and accountability. That includes settling on a clear definition of a "credential of value" and the requirements for what is deemed a "good job" in a state with a high cost of living.

Connecticut's Challenge

The state's relatively high average household income, low unemployment, and high rates of labor market participation tend to obscure a complicated economic picture. Facing several pockets of persistent poverty, an aging workforce in key industries, and growing anxiety among college graduates about their job prospects, state leaders are relying heavily on job market data and industry input to guide their investments in education and training.

As in many other states, there's a glaring mismatch between the current capabilities in Connecticut's workforce and the demands of today's job market. Middle-skills jobs—those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a college degree—are at a premium. There just aren't enough qualified workers to fill them.

The state has several funded initiatives to help more residents enroll and succeed in high-quality postsecondary offerings. Most of these, however, are supported by the post-COVID American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)—federal funding set to end this year. Moreover, officials say, the state's systems that support workforce development are often siloed, and credentials don't always align precisely with the available jobs. And despite Connecticut's rich history in manufacturing, since the late 1980s, employers in that sector have seen a dramatic loss of business due to a shifting economy. This shift has eroded several longstanding education and training pathways.

Kelli-Marie Vallieres saw that pipeline problem up close as CEO of Sound Manufacturing, her family's sheet metal-fabrication business. Her experience launching a collaborative with other companies in Eastern Connecticut to recruit and retain skilled workers laid some of the groundwork for the state's current strategy.

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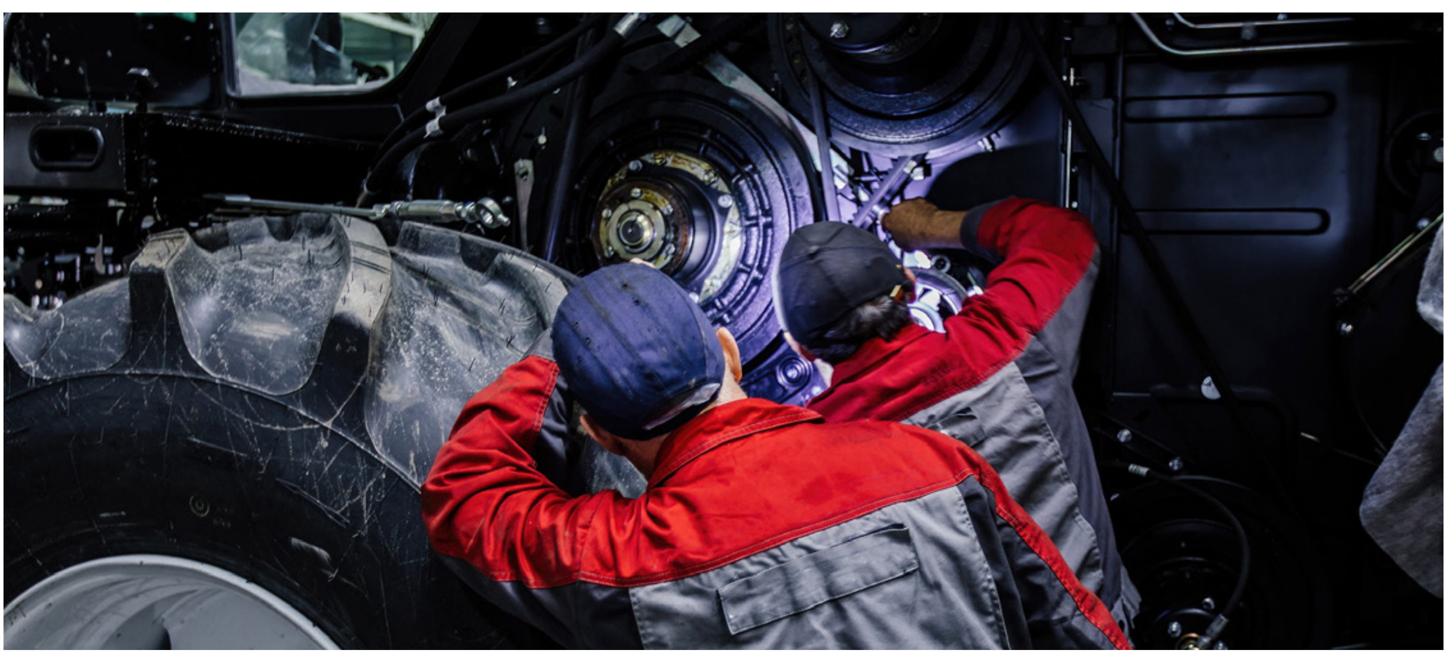
Kelli-Marie Vallieres, chief workforce officer, State of Connecticut

"We've been a 'higher ed or bust' state for a long time. But there are many good jobs across Connecticut that don't require a four-year degree," said Vallieres, who now serves as the state's chief workforce officer. "We meet people every day who don't know about those jobs and employers who are struggling to find and keep talent. We need to get better at connecting training to the jobs that pay a living wage and get people on a pathway to a better future."



Connecticut's Approach:

In her government role, Vallieres is orchestrating the vision set out by Gov. Ned Lamont and the Governor's Workforce Council to drive economic growth by helping more residents obtain short-term training and credentials to gain the skills employers need. The state's strategic plan outlines a series of steps to get there: defining quality in credential programs, engaging employers to help design and support training that leads to in-demand jobs, and building a statewide system for tracking student outcomes.

Central to that strategy is changing how short-term credentials are developed and delivered. Learners in Connecticut can choose from hundreds of short-term credential programs offered by dozens of providers, including CT State Community College and its 12 campuses, four-year institutions, private occupational schools, and workforce training centers. In the past, officials say, such programs were designed without sufficient industry input and failed to evolve fast enough to meet employers' changing needs. The state has worked to replace the longstanding "train and place" model—or "train and pray" as some call it—that treats training and job placement as separate activities.

To that end, the state recently unveiled its definition of a "credential of value," which must be both recognized by employers and help the employee develop the skills and experiences necessary to advance along a career path. With support from Lumina Foundation's FutureReady States initiative, Vallieres' Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS), an independent state agency, has brought together stakeholders from across the vast workforce network to create a framework to identify programs that deliver measurable returns for workers. In Connecticut, such returns include landing "good jobs," or those that require specialized skills and expertise and offer a family-sustaining wage (at least $25-27 an hour), basic benefits, and growth opportunities that can support economic mobility.

This effort builds on Career ConneCT, the centerpiece of the state's sector-based training efforts, which launched in 2022 with $70 million in ARPA funding. Career ConneCT provides short-term training programs and supports to eligible unemployed and underemployed individuals through grants managed by Workforce Investment Boards and community-based organizations across the state.

Participants can earn industry-recognized credentials in in-demand industries such as manufacturing, health care, information technology, clean energy, and infrastructure/construction. They can also get rental assistance, childcare, transportation, and other services that officials say have shown to increase completion rates.

An initial outreach and recruitment push drew 45,000 people to the Career ConneCT internet portal in the first three years.

After Connecticut launched its statewide strategy in 2022, an initial outreach and recruitment push drew 45,000 people to the Career ConneCT internet portal over the next three years. The portal offers comprehensive services to participants, from recruitment through job attainment. The portal serves as the virtual front door for the program and offers a skills inventory, case management, job placement support, and access to training and services.

The state's outreach campaign for Career ConneCT includes motivational messages to a range of demographic groups to help them see themselves in a specific high-demand job and connect with respective training and credentials. The latest phase of the outreach campaign shows employers how they can support workforce-development efforts, particularly for incumbent workers, veterans, and other pools of experienced workers.

Signs of Progress

Career ConneCT has shown significant success since it launched in July 2022. More than 7,400 people have entered training programs and nearly 5,000 landed employment. In addition, the state's broader efforts to help workers tap into workforce programs have been credited with increasing enrollments for short-term credentials at community colleges and private schools.

The merger of the state's 12 independent community colleges into CT State Community College in 2023 has allowed greater coordination of programs, making it easier to pair or stack additional credentials and pursue career pathways across campuses. OWS and other workforce entities are starting to see the efforts pay off, including:

- $10 million in bond funds allocated (out of $30 million authorized) to incentivize innovation and address gaps in programming for workforce training efforts.
- OWS launched the Tech Talent Accelerator to support postsecondary-business partnerships by expanding education for emerging and in-demand fields. This includes $2 million in grants for areas such as cybersecurity, virtual modeling, software development, and digital analytics. Another $2.7 million in grants have launched for AI-focused programs.
- More than 700 employers have joined the state's 14 Regional Sector Partnerships to seek solutions to shared problems related to recruitment and retention of skilled talent.

As the state looks to advance its workforce strategy, officials are working to improve and align data systems across state agencies, higher education, and nonprofits. They also want to collect and use more information about employment and wages. Like most states, Connecticut needs a more robust and consistent data ecosystem to understand how credential programs perform and whether students are seeing a return on the investment.

Looking Ahead

In April, the governor announced a new commission, headed by former U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, to deliver a plan to bolster K-12 and higher education workforce initiatives. The commission will guide a statewide approach to designing and delivering programs. The work will include expansion of dual enrollment and credential programs in high schools, work-based learning opportunities and employer engagement, and funding and accountability models.

The state is continuing to build out the Career ConneCT portal into a comprehensive talent marketplace for finding and earning short-term credentials that are directly aligned to jobs in priority fields. Officials also hope to add a detailed credential registry that explains how a participant can combine credentials to be better positioned for higher-skilled, higher-wage jobs.

"We need to work together to figure out how to make sure opportunities are available regardless of zip code."

Kelli-Marie Vallieres, chief workforce officer, State of Connecticut

While the Career ConneCT framework and training system has depended on federal funding that will soon expire, the state is investing short-term funds and pursuing philanthropic support to continue the program while a long-term funding plan is developed.

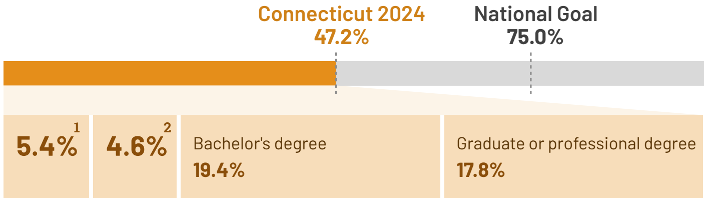
Those who advocate short-term training options in Connecticut acknowledge that a single credential is unlikely to lead to a high-wage job. There's more work to be done in mapping pathways to good jobs through stackable credentials and aligned degree programs. That will require even more collaboration and cooperation between workforce boards, community organizations, academic partners, and employers—all of whom have multiple priorities and reporting requirements as well as barriers to synchronizing data systems.

"We are all working to figure out which credentials and pathways are most promising for very different communities with different challenges across the state," Vallieres said. "But we need to work together to figure out how to make sure opportunities are available regardless of zip code."

Connecticut Snapshot

Credentials of Value Share in Connecticut

Among 1.6m people ages 25-64 in the labor force



[1] Short-term credentials: **5.4%** [2] Associate degree: **4.6%**

Measured as the share of the labor force with a post-high school degree, certification, or certificate and are making at least 15% more than the national median annual salary of a high school graduate. *Source: Lumina Foundation's A Stronger Nation, 2025*

Definition of Credentials of Value:

Credentials of Value are employer informed and validated non-degree credentials that include non-credit certifications, credit-bearing certificates, industry-recognized credentials, or licensure. These credentials are designed to be stackable and or transferable into postsecondary degrees, allowing individuals to combine them with other qualifications to create pathways into high-wage occupations and advanced credentials.

Priority or Emerging Industry Sectors

Advanced manufacturing, health care, IT/AI, maritime/defense, green jobs, and biosciences

Partners/Collaborators in State Short-Term Credential Efforts

- Connecticut Office of Workforce Strategy
- Connecticut State Colleges & Universities
- Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges
- State Department of Education
- Connecticut Business and Industry Association
- Advance CT
- Connecticut Technical Education and Career System
- Regional Sector Partnerships Lead
- University of Connecticut
- Workforce Development Boards

Building Connecticut's Defense Workforce

For more than a century, Connecticut has been a major hub for defense manufacturing, with contractors and their supply chain partners working to build nuclear submarines in Groton, helicopters in Stratford, and fighter jet engines in East Hartford.

The state's role in supporting the defense industry has created what workforce leaders call generational employment. The jobs can't be offshored, pay union wages, and are backed by multi-year federal contracts totaling nearly $100 billion. With many highly skilled workers set to retire in the coming years, the state is investing in short-term training programs that offer credentials directly aligned with the entry- and middle-level jobs that support those contracts.

Connecticut's Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative has been building the training infrastructure to help more residents gain the skills needed to feed the related workforce pipeline. The initiative connects community colleges and technical high schools with employers who need workers with specialized skills for jobs in machining, welding, and related trades. This helps many participants get immediate job offers after completing their programs.

Now the state is making those credentials more accessible and transferable. Under one new partnership, the Connecticut Office of Workforce Strategy and Northeastern University's Defense Industrial Base Institute are certifying training programs that will award "badges" – verifiable digital credentials for defense-related occupations. Workersown these badges and can carry them across employers. The initiative specifically targets Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STAR) workers, those who have gained skills through military service or on-the-job experience rather than four-year degrees. The long-term goal: Once approved by the U.S. Navy, a single, industry-validated credential may be recognized by shipyards across the country. This will allow a machining technician trained in Connecticut to bring a verified, portable skills record to an employer in Maine, Rhode Island, or another coastal hub.

With a combination of state, federal, industry, and philanthropic funding, the free training programs set out to prepare some 7,000 workers over the next few years to support increased production of submarines. Many of the programs lead to certifications that meet the state's definition of a "credential of value." That is, they are stackable with other education or training and are aligned with occupations that provide job stability and benefits, often paying $52,000 a year – what the state considers a living wage.

"When we work closely with employers to design short-term credential programs that reflect their precise training needs," said Kelli-Marie Vallieres, the state's chief workforce officer, "we can quickly fill any workforce gaps and open up opportunities that give more people in Connecticut a path to economic mobility."

FutureReady States - Priorities

The FutureReady States initiative is a key element of Lumina Foundation's bold new goal: by 2040, 75 percent of U.S. adults in the labor market will have a degree or other credential of value leading to economic prosperity. The FutureReady States – Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia – are receiving technical support to develop shared strategies and measurable goals to ensure that short-term credential programs deliver positive outcomes for learners and employers. The FutureReady States are taking a customized approach focused on three general priorities:

- Conducting a landscape analysis of short-term education and training opportunities and the various funding sources for institutions and learners.
- Identifying opportunities for strengthening pathways, such as defining "stackability" and creating more seamless alignment between degree and non-degree programs.
- Developing strategies to improve the return on investment for short-term credential programs, such as defining standards for credentials of value, building out data systems, and tracking job and wage earnings for specific credentials.

Lumina Foundation 2040 Goal - A Stronger Nation

In a changing world, education is more important than ever. Lumina Foundation believes that higher education should be a tool for opportunity, helping people create a better, more prosperous future for themselves and their families. That's why Lumina has set a bold new goal: By 2040, 75 percent of adults in the U.S. labor force will have college degrees or other credentials of value leading to economic prosperity.

To do so will require helping a greater proportion of the adult population to tap into the many education and training options available beyond high school. Short-term credentials are an essential part of that equation, but they must reflect high-quality preparation and demonstrate a direct link to good jobs and better wages.

Nearly three dozen states are funding 111 active initiatives for improving the short-term credential ecosystem, at a total of $8.1 billion, according to the latest data compiled by HCM Strategists with funding from Lumina. That's up from last year's total of 70 initiatives in 32 states totaling $5.6 billion.

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