

# Building “Career Pathways” for Low-Skilled Workers Through the Workforce Investment Act

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Current policy often fails to recognize that a wide range of workers enter the labor market in different ways and with different needs: young people entering an apprenticeship, low-wage working adults enrolling in community college, trade-impacted union workers re-training for a new occupation, limited English speakers, or ex-offenders re-entering the workforce. Eighty-eight million adults currently in the workforce (57 percent) have low literacy, limited English proficiency or lack an educational credential past high school. Furthermore, two-thirds of the workforce of 2020, and about 45 percent of the workforce of 2030, is in the workforce today, beyond the reach of K-12 or traditional college access reform.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) should be reformed to expand access to workforce education and training for all workers by better aligning adult basic education, job training and higher education systems to create pathways to postsecondary educational credentials for people while they continue to work and support their families. Reforms should ease transitions between programs and across institutions; expand investments in education and training, particularly for “non-traditional” students; and provide supports and services that allow individuals enrolled in education and training programs to succeed. Incentives and supports should be offered to adapt existing programs and services—and add new ones—to enable individuals to advance to successively higher levels of education and employment. Ideally, WIA should promote policies that help transform institutions and organizations involved in education, employment and social services by strengthening cooperation to improve capacity to respond to the needs of workers and employers.

## **Amend the Workforce Investment Act Titles I and II to Better Align Systems**

### ***Title I***

- Clarify that the focus of the program should be on the provision of high quality education, training and related services which provide individuals with the necessary skills and experience to access jobs that pay family-supporting wages and have advancement potential.
  - Eliminate the “sequence of services” provisions and allow individuals to immediately access needed services;
  - Establish a required percentage (consistent with current averages) of WIA formula funding that must be spent by states and localities on worker services, with an emphasis on training; and



- Clarify that WIA funds can be used in conjunction with Pell grants to ensure that low-income students receive the full support they need to succeed in training.
- Increase the focus and capacity to serve individuals who have limited skills or have other barriers to economic success.
  - Ensure that lower-skill individuals have a priority of service for education, training and related services; and
  - Allow local areas the flexibility to provide training through Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) or contract training, as appropriate.
- Revamp the current performance measurement system.
  - Require use of an empirically supportable methodology to adjust performance levels based on participant characteristics and labor market conditions;
  - Review and revise current performance measures to encourage provision of services to individuals who have limited skills or have barriers to employment; and
  - Develop and, over time, implement a system of shared accountability across workforce and other education and training programs.
- Improve coordination between the workforce development and adult education systems and promote better integration of occupational training, basic skills, and English language services.
  - Require states to set targets that steadily increase over time the percentage of participants co-enrolled in WIA Titles I and II.

## ***Title II***

- Set as the purpose of Title II increasing the rate at which students attain career and postsecondary success.
- Mandate that each of the three required local activities funded by Title II— Adult education and literacy services (including workplace literacy services), Family literacy services, and English literacy services— increase the rate at which students attain career and postsecondary success.
  - Explicitly allow these three services to be provided before or in combination with work or postsecondary education and training and recognize that program strategies can include, but are not limited to, approaches that integrate basic skills and postsecondary education and training content or which may dual or concurrently enroll students in basic skills and postsecondary education and training.
- Reporting requirements should reflect new focus on increasing the rate at which all students attain career and postsecondary success. Ensure that federal adult education accountability



is focused on objective, measurable, evidence-based indicators of student progress toward credentials of value in the labor market and success in the labor market.

- Measure all core outcomes (educational gains, entered employment, retained employment, receipt of secondary school diploma or GED, and entered postsecondary education or training) for all Title II participants instead of tracking outcomes only for students who report a goal related to the measure; and
  - Measure postsecondary success (rather than enrollment), such as completing the equivalent of one semester of occupational training or college-level math or English, or earning a credential of demonstrated value in the labor market.
- Mandate that a portion of Federally funded Title II state grants be used for seeding and scaling up approaches that integrate basic skills and postsecondary education and training or which dual or concurrently enroll students in basic skills and postsecondary education and training.
  - Expand work-based literacy and increase access in other ways—for example, through flexible delivery modes, including weekend, compressed, or accelerated formats, and technology-based strategies—to adult education for lower-skilled incumbent workers.

### **Provide Grants to States to Align Adult Education, Job Training, and Higher Education**

- Provide new, designated Federal funding for “State Policy Leadership Grants” to support systemic state policy change at the agency level across adult education and postsecondary education and training programs and align services and improve outcomes across workforce development, postsecondary education, and adult education/English as a Second Language in a career pathway framework. Grants should be administered by new, cross-agency taskforce or center focused on workforce education and training.
- Provide new, designated Federal funding for “Career Pathways Planning and Implementation Grants” to support local implementation of new policies and practices that are aimed at increasing student success across a wide range of education and training partners in a career pathway.

### **Create a Cross-Agency Taskforce or Center Focused on Workforce Education and Training**

- Taskforce or center would be tasked with: looking across federal agencies and programs to determine how to best promote the attainment of workforce skills and educational credentials for all workers; administering the State Policy Leadership and the Career Pathways Planning and Implementation Grants; acting as a clearinghouse of best practices; providing TA to states; and making recommendations across federal agencies for improvements to existing programs (these recommendations could be for legislation, executive order, waiver, etc.).