Governors and state legislators wonder why employers continue to tell them that they cannot find skilled workers for open positions. These state elected officials (SEOs) want to know why the state’s schools, colleges and training programs are not collectively solving these industry skill gap challenges. But the reality is that most SEOs typically know about only a portion of their state’s workforce education and training programs, and have no way to grasp how they are or are not aligning with each other, or aligning collectively with labor market demand.

Advocates for low-income students and workers would like to see more state residents prepared for these open positions, many of which are middle-skill jobs that require some form of postsecondary training but not a bachelor’s degree. But most often, it is difficult to assess how many people have effectively moved through high school or adult basic skills instruction and through a variety of investments in education and training across a variety of locations over time, to figure out why some people persist and succeed and others “leak out.”

Each state has multiple programs that can help a diversity of students and workers prepare for middle-skill jobs. Most of these programs operate outside the “traditional” K-12-to-university pipeline that preoccupies most SEOs’ attention:

- Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title I Program for Adults
- WIA Title I Program for Dislocated Workers
- Employment Service
- Adult Basic Education
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Employment and Training
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training
- Secondary Career and Technical Education
- Community and Technical College Workforce Education and Training (Postsecondary Career and Technical Education)
- Apprenticeship
- Corrections Employment and Training
- Customize Training for Employers
Even though many of these programs work together to serve the same individuals and employers, information about these programs tends to be only program specific. It is usually impossible, or at least very difficult to compile or compare information across programs.

The State Workforce and Education Alignment Project (SWEAP) is proposing to develop system-wide information about workforce education and training programs for state policy leaders. The goal is to create better cross-program information that allows state policy leaders to see how these programs can work together in their state, and how individuals can advance through these programs over time in the pursuit of post-secondary credentials and higher-paying employment. SWEAP will assess how state policy leaders find such information useful for the purpose of improving workforce development policy in their state, and ultimately educational and labor market outcomes for program participants.

What could cross-program information provide?

A model system would provide the ability to track participants across programs (and steps within programs) and into the labor market. It would enable policy leaders and program administrators to know such information as:

- The demographics of participants served across the system.
- The extent participants receive services from multiple programs and whether they are complimentary or duplicative.
- The costs of all services a participant receives.
- The extent participants advance along achievement points that, once accomplished, substantially improve participants’ chances of completing degrees and certificates.
- The number of participants who receive a postsecondary credential and the cross program flow involved.
- Whether participants achieve desired labor market outcomes.
- The relationship between services and outcomes.
- Demographic breakdowns of all the above, including by income level.
- Alignment of system completers with occupational demand.

An important step in providing such information has been the creation of education and workforce longitudinal data systems that can track program participants over time in programs and into employment. The most advanced longitudinal systems also link with other data systems, such as those for health and human services and corrections. The longitudinal data systems themselves, however, do not provide the information listed above. They are a necessary tool, but policy leaders still need to know the questions to ask and how to use these tools in order to obtain useful information about workforce development.

A complete information system includes the tools, the data and the actual information that policy leaders find meaningful. Then in order for it to matter, the information has to be used,
Project Steps

In order to test the utility of cross-program information for policy leaders, SWEAP is taking the following steps:

**Phase I**

- Identify leading edge states, the types of information they produce and how they produce it, and how policy leaders use the information.
- Build the SWEAP framework that describes the cross-program information and its uses and includes benchmarks by which state progress in creating an information system can be measured over time and across states.
- Discover what would need to be done to establish leading edge capacity in a range of other states, a range based on the extent to which they have an information system in place.
- Explore policy leaders’ interest in establishing such capacity in their state.
- Share Phase I findings in writing and presentations.
- Identify states that may be interested in participating in Phase II.

**Phase II (Dependent on success of Phase I and funding for a second phase)**

- Provide assistance to a select number of states to build out new cross-program information systems.
- Using the benchmarks developed in Phase I, track state progress and share the results.
- Assess the usefulness of the information systems for informing public policy. Are they leading to changes that measurably improve workforce outcomes?
- Share the findings with state policy leaders and assess their interest in advancing and using information systems in their state.

Changes that are expected from SEO use of better information include more career pathways that offer sequences of courses and support services that lead to industry-recognized credentials, increased credential attainment and greater public investments. A key distinguishing feature of NSC’s SWEAP project is that it is not a data effort for the sake of creating better data. It is a data effort for the purpose of preparing SEOs to consider broader
system-wide reforms and realignments of their social services, adult education, job training, career and technical education, and higher education policies.

By taking these steps, SWEAP expects to show that providing SEOs and other policy leaders with meaningful information about the workforce development system will increase their awareness and interest in the system. Improved information will also enable leaders to find ways to make the system operate more effectively. In the end, increased attention and better information for system improvement will materially benefit participants in the system, improving their education and labor market outcomes.

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