



Smart Postsecondary Policies That Work for Students and the Economy

The rapidly changing economy demands new ways to build workforce talent and help all Americans secure family-supporting careers.

Every state needs solutions. JFF presents this postsecondary policy agenda to advise state leaders on what works to increase the number of college graduates with the skills and credentials employers value. Our aim is to make pursuit of postsecondary credentials simpler, faster, and more affordable so that more Americans are able to advance in the new economy.

Smart Postsecondary Policies centers on the crucial role of two-year community and technical colleges in our country. With low tuition and open enrollment, these publicly funded schools serve millions of low-income, underprepared, and first-generation students—a vital source of untapped talent in the United States.

Our recommendations recognize that community colleges cannot solve our nation's workforce challenges alone. Therefore, we call on states to strengthen alignment with K-12 education, higher education, employers, workforce development, and human services.

Smart Postsecondary Policies is organized into three key strategies for making postsecondary education work:

- ① **Focus on the talent development needs of regional and state economies**
- ② **Create efficient pathways to postsecondary credentials**
- ③ **Help all students fulfill their potential**



15 Smart Postsecondary Policies That Work for Students and the Economy

Based on JFF's 20 years of experience collaborating with education leaders at the forefront of the college completion movement, we know there are no silver bullets or one-size-fits-all approaches to making change through state policy. We encourage states to consider a range of policy levers to achieve the goals of the agenda, such as:

- **Data collection and reporting systems** that measure meaningful education and labor market outcomes and make information available to the public to guide their education decisions and hold systems accountable
- **Enabling policies** that encourage innovation and foster stronger collaboration across systems to accelerate implementation of evidence-based approaches
- **High-level directives** that set clear expectations and deadlines for practitioners and partners to take action
- **Intensive technical assistance** deployed statewide to support practitioners and partners
- **Financial resources, incentives, and tax policy changes** that inject much-needed investments into the implementation and scaling of evidence-based approaches

For more information about Smart Postsecondary Policies, contact David Altstadt, associate director, at daltstadt@jff.org.

Focus on --- **Talent Development Needs of Regional and State Economies**



1. The state has a clear and ambitious postsecondary attainment goal that includes targets for historically underserved populations.

- The state has established a clear and ambitious postsecondary attainment goal.
- The goal includes targets for different types of credentials (e.g., certificates with labor market value, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees).
- The goal includes targets for specific populations (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, income levels, gender, and age).
- The goal includes targets for different types of learners (e.g., part time, full time, first time, and returners without a degree).
- The state has explicit strategies to close postsecondary attainment gaps across targeted underserved populations (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, first generation, and low income).



2. The state has a data system that enables policymakers to understand how students are progressing through public education and into the workforce.

- The state has a longitudinal data system that links individual student data across public K-12 schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions.
- The system disaggregates data by student demographics and learner types (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, income levels, gender, age, part time, full time, first time, and returners without a degree).
- The system links education and workforce data (e.g., employment status for college completers).
- Easy-to-understand data reports are released to the public at least once each year.
- Easy-to-understand data reports that specifically examine community college student progression are released to the public at least once each year.



3. The state makes labor market information available to track and report employment outcomes of college graduates.

- Easy-to-understand data about labor market outcomes (e.g., average earnings) of graduates for at least five years after graduation are released annually to the public (e.g., through a web-based dashboard).
- Labor market outcomes are available by program of study and credential type.
- Labor market outcomes are available by student demographics and learner types (e.g., racial/ethnic groups, income levels, gender, age, part time, full time, first time, and returners without a degree).
- The state tracks data that can determine if a college graduate is employed in an occupation related to their program of study.
- The state maps labor market outcomes to regional in-demand jobs or a living wage.



4. The state sets expectations for community colleges to use regional labor market information and employer input **to align their programs to workforce needs.**

- Community colleges review regional labor market information regularly (at least once every five years) in order to maintain in-demand career-focused programs.
- Community colleges use regional labor market information and employer input to demonstrate demand and relevance when starting a new program.
- Community colleges review regional labor market information and gather employer input regularly to demonstrate demand and relevance when creating short-term (one year or less) credentials.
- The state's funding formula for community colleges, or another state funding mechanism, allocates resources to support in-demand programs and innovations in response to recent or projected labor market changes.



5. The state supports regional alignment among education and workforce development providers toward in-demand careers.

- The state supports regional collaboration among K-12 education, adult education, community colleges, four-year institutions, and workforce development to align programs and services with in-demand careers.
- The state supports regional collaboration among K-12 education, adult education, community colleges, four-year institutions, and workforce development to identify in-demand jobs and promote them to students and families with unified messaging.
- The state supports the use of industry sector-based strategies to fill regional talent pipelines.



6. The state supports work-based learning opportunities for postsecondary students as part of their program of study.

- The state supports the growth of paid, high-quality work-based learning opportunities for postsecondary students (e.g., internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships).
- The state provides financial incentives to employers to offer paid, high-quality work-based learning opportunities for community college students (e.g., tax credits and grants/reimbursements to employers that help defray the cost of wages).
- The state supports a key role for community colleges in expanding Registered Apprenticeships (e.g., tuition subsidies for apprentices, community college sponsorship of registered apprentices, alignment of postsecondary credentials with apprenticeship programs, and community college leadership of the state apprenticeship system).
- The state funds high-quality on- and off-campus work-study experiences for community college students.

Create Efficient Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials



7. The state expands access to high-quality dual enrollment pathways designed to save students time and money in completing a postsecondary credential.

- The state has policies or systems in place to ensure that dual enrollment programs are high quality.
- The state has dual enrollment funding guidelines that districts, community colleges, and four-year institutions must follow to promote financial sustainability for all partners.
- The state supports distinct career- and academic-focused pathways from dual enrollment to postsecondary programs of study to accelerate credential attainment and entry into careers.
- The state makes dual enrollment courses free for students from low-income households.
- The state promotes equitable access to dual enrollment by strengthening partnerships between high schools and colleges serving low-income communities (e.g., expanding course offerings that help students begin a credential pathway and enhancing outreach and support services).



8. The state supports college readiness approaches that accelerate entry into college-level courses as quickly as appropriate.

- The state supports widespread use of high school transition courses in English and math that, upon successful completion, enable students to begin college-level work.
- The state supports widespread use of multiple measures to determine a student's readiness for college-level courses (e.g., nationally recognized standardized tests, high school GPA, portfolios, and passing a high school equivalency exam).
- The state supports widespread use of the corequisite model for students who are not deemed college ready. This accelerated remediation approach enables students to enroll in college-level introductory math and English courses at the same time they receive developmental tutoring/instruction.

- The state supports widespread and coordinated use of math pathways by community colleges and four-year institutions so that students can take math courses most relevant and appropriate for their academic discipline and career path. Through math pathways, institutions differentiate math requirements between STEM and non-STEM fields and between transfer and applied programs.
- The state strengthens on-ramps to postsecondary education for youth and adults without a high school credential by supporting widespread use of integrated education and training models (i.e., students learn basic academic skills and in-demand occupational and technical skills so they can attain a high school credential along with a postsecondary certificate with labor market value).



9. The state supports efficient pathways toward the attainment of a two-year degree.

- The state regularly tracks and reports time to degree for two-year degrees.
- The state supports community colleges in awarding credit for prior learning toward students' program of study.
- The state supports community colleges in establishing and promoting default curricular maps for each program of study to help all students make informed choices in their course selection.
- The state supports community colleges in awarding credit for short-term, career-focused credentials toward a two-year degree (e.g., stacking or embedding credentials within programs of study).



10. The state supports efficient pathways to a four-year degree from community colleges.

- The state has a general education core curriculum that articulates as credit between and among all community colleges and four-year institutions.
- The state supports community colleges and four-year institutions to work together to map transfer pathways for students by intended major and make that information accessible and easy to understand for students.

- The state supports four-year institutions in setting financial aid and/or registration policies that ensure transfer students are on equal footing with four-year students.
- The state has statewide transfer goals, such as shared accountability metrics for public two- and four-year institutions, that promote students' ultimate education and career goals.



11. The state has community college finance policies designed to ensure funding is sufficient and aligned to support broader state education goals.

- State and local appropriations for community colleges are at least proportionally equal to appropriations for public four-year institutions.
- The state provides funding to help community colleges with the upfront costs associated with implementing evidence-based approaches (e.g., resources to implement guided pathways or support leadership roles in regional partnerships focused on talent development or economic mobility).
- The state provides a preferential tax credit for contributions to community college endowments in order to spur increased donations that support student success.
- If a state has outcomes-based funding, its funding formula provides a sizable and sustainable source of funds for rewarding community colleges for student progression and completion of credentials and prioritizes improving outcomes for underrepresented, underprepared students.

Help All Students Fulfill Their Potential



12. The state supports college and career advising to help students and families make well-informed educational choices.

- The state supports districts in making college and career advising widely available for high school students beyond traditional high school guidance counseling (e.g., dedicated college or career advisors in high schools, technology-based advising tools, and state-supported efforts to connect students with volunteer mentors from employers or the community).

- There is a state-funded, statewide initiative to provide targeted advising to adults with some postsecondary credits to help them reconnect and complete college.
- The state’s funding formula, or another state funding mechanism, specifically enhances the capacity of community colleges to provide student support services (e.g., advisors, career counselors, success coaches, and technology-based advising tools).
- The state alleviates barriers to college for disconnected youth and adults (e.g., scholarships for foster youth, funding of reengagement centers that help out-of-school youth pursue education and employment, and prohibiting college applications from requiring applicants to disclose criminal records).



13. The state promotes college affordability.

- The state tracks and reports total cost of attendance for public two- and four-year colleges differentiated by their geographic locations (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural).
- The state tracks and reports average unmet financial need of students by their household configuration, type of credential, and/or income level.
- The state provides more funding for need-based grants than merit-based grants to bolster access to low-income students.
- If a state has a college promise program, it covers some college-related expenses beyond tuition and fees for community college students (given that federal Pell grants cover all or most tuition and fees for many community college students).



14. State financial aid is flexible, accessible to different types of students, and incentivizes completion.

- Part-time students are eligible for state-funded need-based aid.
- State aid is available for short-term, in-demand credentials (which take a year or less to complete).
- The state provides financial aid to underprepared adult learners who are gaining college-ready skills while working toward credential attainment (e.g., programs that concurrently teach basic skills and occupational/technical skills).

- State aid specifically targets persistence (e.g., completion grants for students near graduation and reduced tuition or scholarships for transfer students).



15. The state supports the financial stability of community college students and helps them complete a postsecondary credential.

- The state provides emergency aid to college students facing economic insecurity (e.g., food assistance, housing assistance, transportation assistance, child care, and emergency grants).
- The state supports community colleges in screening students to determine if they are eligible for public benefits that will improve their financial stability (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Affordable Care Act, and child care subsidies).
- The state uses flexibility in federal policy to increase support for community college students (e.g., defining eligibility and/or work requirements for TANF, SNAP, or child care subsidies in ways favorable to college students).
- The state leverages federal funding to support community colleges that serve low-income students (e.g., using TANF and SNAP funds to help pay for college staff who coach and advise eligible low-income students).
- The state supports regional partnerships among community colleges, local nonprofit organizations, and human service agencies that connect students to resources to help them persist and complete.