



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

TOWARD PATHWAYS-CENTERED POLICY

DELIBERATIONS OF THE FALL 2016 FORUM OF THE POLICY LEADERSHIP TRUST FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

JANUARY 2017

INTRODUCTION

Stemming from its many years of partnering with community colleges on the completion agenda, Jobs for the Future invited 45 reform-minded practitioners to serve on the [Policy Leadership Trust for Student Success](#) to build a unified voice for influencing federal and state policy discussions. JFF also enlisted a dozen researchers, policy thinkers, and national leaders as advisors to the Policy Leadership Trust to draw on their knowledge and expertise so that Trust policy deliberations are grounded in the latest evidence and enriched by a thoughtful exploration of policy levers.

In 2015 and 2016, JFF organized a series of task force meetings so that members could dig into specific areas of interest, including [building pathways to credentials](#), [redesigning developmental education](#), [strengthening credit transfer](#) between two- and four-year institutions, and [outcomes-based funding](#). Emerging from these task force discussions, Trust members developed a set of [guiding principles](#) for policy change and published commentaries on *Inside Higher Ed* reflecting thought leadership on [developmental education](#) and [pathways](#) reforms.

Since those initial meetings, the field has embraced guided pathways as a coherent approach for improving student success. To build upon this momentum, JFF organized the November 30 meeting to convene Trust members across the four task forces to begin to develop a comprehensive pathway-friendly policy agenda. The November meeting served as a culminating event for those Trust members concluding their two years of service and, simultaneously, was a launching point for the next generation of the Trust, which will strive to put practitioner-informed policy ideas into action. With the support of JFF, the Trust is producing a policy framework that highlights evidence-based approaches for the scaling of guided pathways and will seek to raise awareness and support of these policy options among fellow postsecondary practitioners and state and federal policymakers.

OVERVIEW OF THE DAY

Against the backdrop of the growing momentum around guided pathways as well as the presidential election, JFF convened the Policy Leadership Trust on November 30, with a request for postsecondary practitioners to identify what *good* policy looks like for improving community college completion. Twenty Trust members and nine advisors joined JFF in Boston for a series of presentations and open-floor discussion periods.

Over the course of the day, the group of institutional leaders, state officials, and national advisors discussed federal and state policy issues dealing with:

- **pathways-centered institutional reforms**
- **cross-sector alignment**
- **college affordability**
- **connections to work**

Equity surfaced as the overarching theme of the day, punctuated by concerns over underprepared and disadvantaged students and less-connected institutions not benefiting as much from pathway reforms. Trust members emphasized all policy and system changes should be viewed through an equity lens, otherwise reforms may produce unintended consequences such as tracking into lower-value credentials and a growing chasm between the “have” and “have-not” institutions. While cautioning fellow members not to jettison the core values of community college—equity, access, and opportunity—Trust co-chair Rey Garcia stated that the rhetoric around these values may have to change to fend off arguments that “college isn’t for everyone.” Garcia encouraged practitioners to redefine what the word “college” means and to engage policymakers, employers, and communities in how two-year institutions are uniquely positioned to help bridge the economic and educational divide.

In the morning, Trust members received a federal policy briefing from JFF regarding the prospects for reauthorizing the Higher Education Act and Carl D. Perkins Career-Technical Education Act, and potential reforms that could be adopted, such as FAFSA simplification and more equitable distribution of Federal Work-Study Program formula funds. Trust members expressed concern that the Trump Administration may attempt to restrict access to the Pell Grant for students enrolled in developmental education. (Note: JFF has subsequently issued a set of education and workforce development policy [recommendations](#) to the incoming Trump Administration.) Reflecting on the investments that President Obama made in community college (e.g., the TAACCCT grant program), Trust members also discussed opportunities under a Trump Administration for new federal resources. One avenue would be to attach job training resources to legislation funding new construction and infrastructure projects—one of Trump’s top priorities. Several members advocated that the Trust take a public position for community college funds to train workers for these jobs.

Next, Trust members heard from Kay McClenney of the American Association of Community Colleges and Hana Lahr of the Community College Research Center about the latest trends in implementing guided pathways. In her [presentation](#), McClenney reminded Trust members of the arc of completion reforms leading up to guided pathways, presented a [framework](#) for scaling guided pathways being used by colleges in the AACC Pathways Project and other statewide initiatives, and shared emerging evidence of impact from the field. In her [presentation](#), Lahr reported on progress that AACC Pathways Project colleges are making in scaling various pathway elements over the past year. CCRC is documenting implementation trends through its [self-assessment tool](#) and is planning to publish a series of case studies in 2017 illustrating

various levels of successful implementation. Following their presentations, Trust members acknowledged a strategic opportunity to bring coherence to the field by aligning their policy recommendations with the AACC Pathways Framework.

The morning wrapped up with a panel discussion from three additional Trust advisors: Mary Alice McCarthy of New America, Doug Shapiro of the National Student Clearinghouse, and Martha Snyder of HCM Strategists. Shapiro shared [research](#) into declining enrollment, particularly among adults, and widening economic stratification in student success outcomes. Snyder discussed the need for states to redirect scarce higher education resources to two-year students and institutions. McCarthy encouraged greater alignment between career-technical education and general education transfer pathways to boost skill building and economic mobility. In the afternoon, Nikki Edgecombe of CCRC and Lashawn Richburg-Hayes of MDRC [presented](#) emerging evidence on student success in postsecondary education, including comprehensive approaches (e.g., Accelerated Study in Associate Programs—ASAP), intrusive advising, multiple measures, compression/mainstreaming of developmental education (e.g., co-requisites), and incentives to induce students to take appropriate actions. They encouraged institutions seeking to replicate effective models to do so with fidelity.

MAJOR THEMES OF DISCUSSION

Throughout the day's proceedings, the Trust conversation centered on four major themes with equity infused throughout:

PATHWAY-CENTERED INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

- **Transparent and flexible pathways.** Pathways need to be transparent to ensure students have access to information to make the best selections and flexible enough to allow students to switch programs. Pathways should include strong and proactive advising to support student decisions on course selection and to intervene if students are struggling academically. There are equity implications for who determines which pathways are most appropriate for which students; as a result, it is important to think about who ought to choose the pathways: students, their advisors, or their institutions or states.
- **Pathway reforms need clear focus on equity,** otherwise they can lead to tracking underprepared and disadvantaged students into lower-value, short-term credentials with no pathway out.
- **Excess credit accumulation is a big deal.** Accumulating excess credits affects completion, raises costs and leads to shortages in financial aid, and creates opportunity costs, like prolonging entry into the labor market. However, most states and institutions do not readily have data on credit accumulation.
- **Full engagement is needed to scale pathways.** Presidents need to lead, and faculty and student services need to be engaged in decisions and redesign efforts. Program mapping can be the first step, but guided pathways are much bigger than that. Even when programs are mapped, institutions and states need to develop an engagement strategy for ensuring all faculty and staff are aware of changes. This can be politically hazardous, in that streamlining course offerings and sequences can be contentious.

- **Pathways should not be designed with only college-ready students in mind.** On-ramps must be ensured for underprepared students to enter a full range of programs and avoid the risk of tracking.
- **Policy can drive systems change.** Trust members pointed to Ohio as an example of a state that has leveraged state policy to support the scaling of guided pathways. Ohio's 100 percent outcome-based funding formula and legislatively mandated two-year campus completion plans has spurred deep institutional engagement in student success learning institutes delivered by the Ohio Association of Community Colleges.

CROSS-SECTOR ALIGNMENT

- **Aligning sectors and agendas.** There is a need to build an aligned policy agenda for K-12, community college, universities, and workforce development to show impact and benefits across the ecosystem. Community colleges sit at the intersection with these partners and provide a bridge across the social divide of low-skilled, low-income to high-skilled, high-income populations.
- **Bridge the divide.** Pathways must bridge the divide between credit and noncredit coursework and between general education transfer programs and career technical education (CTE) programs. CTE should not be the terminal exit point; curriculum should lead to a defined pathway. Moreover, institutions should consider upside-down degrees, where entering students begin taking courses in their program of study early, then transition into broad liberal arts courses later in their program. Additionally, pathways should bridge the divide between two- and four-year institutions on transfer and math pathways.
- **Leverage alternative on-ramps.** The definition of on-ramps needs to be expanded to include adult education and English as a second language, including how evidence-based approaches (e.g., Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training, or I-BEST) fit into pathways.

COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

- **It matters who and what states fund.** More compelling advocacy is needed to help states better understand the unique contributions of community colleges in creating more graduates through guided pathways and to help make the case for an adequate share of resources needed for scale.
- **Make the return on investment case for scaling funds.** Community colleges need to balance fiduciary responsibility of spending current resources effectively while advocating for more resources. Successfully gaining new funds in a challenging budgetary environment will require a strong case for return on investment.
- **Braid funding to minimize costs.** Higher-cost, evidence-based approaches can generate more revenue in terms of higher completion rates while producing cost savings even in the short term if institutions get smarter about accessing and braiding alternative funding sources, such as permissible use of federal adult education and Perkins funds for I-BEST-style co-teaching models.
- **Outcomes-based funding can be a tool for equity.** As currently designed, outcomes-based funding systems may disproportionately benefit certain institutions and subgroups of

students while possibly producing unintended consequences around admissions restrictions and weakened academic rigor. Meanwhile, the financial incentives of outcomes-based funding are minimal in states that have designed funding formulas that still primarily allocate resources based on enrollment. Nonetheless, Trust members urged that it is still possible to design outcomes-based funding systems in ways that incentivize guided pathways and greater equity by rewarding completion of high-value credential programs for disadvantaged, underrepresented populations.

- **Make a push for state financial aid reform.** Ensure state financial aid is available to all two-year students, including nontraditional and part-time students, that can be used for school-related expenses beyond tuition (e.g., textbooks) and is structured in ways that incentivize student persistence and completion.
- **Go beyond financial aid.** States and institutions should look for ways to increase eligibility and access to public assistance programs for economically disadvantaged and food-insecure students.

CONNECTIONS TO WORK

- **Demand-driven pathways.** Guided pathways should be informed by employers and responsive to local labor market needs. States can support demand-driven pathways by building robust systems for collecting and analyzing regional labor market intelligence.
- **Embedding work-based learning into pathways.** State and institutional investments in internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of work-based learning would help current students choose and persist in appropriate pathways and could provide an indispensable source of income to attract working adults to return to school. Colleges should reward credit for current and prior learning on the job.
- **Alternative credentials—an alternative for whom?** A big conversation is brewing right now on developing alternative credentials, but there is a question as to whether low-income students and students of color will have access to and benefit from such credentials.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE POLICY LEADERSHIP TRUST

JFF concluded the November 30 meeting with a discussion on how the Trust can evolve and deepen its work to achieve maximum impact. In the coming weeks and months, JFF will help the Trust to:

- **Formalize the operations of the Policy Leadership Trust** with operating norms that define membership terms and roles, and that determines how the Trust will both speak in one voice and provide opportunities for unique perspectives of members.
- **Develop a state policy framework** that proposes key principles and promotes proven policy approaches for scaling guided pathways from a practitioner perspective. There is an opportunity to align the framework and policy solutions to the key components of the AACCC Guided Pathways Framework and build on momentum in the field. And there is an opportunity for the framework to elevate issues around connections to work and economic mobility.

- **Build a robust communications strategy** that positions the Trust as a key thought leader in the postsecondary policy space in ways that influence the adoption and implementation of guided pathways. Communications may include commentaries/op-eds, blogs, briefs, and social media posts. Give consideration to who our key audiences are.
- **Consider a federal engagement strategy** to raise awareness of and support for guided pathway policies and practices within the Trump Administration, Congress, and other key stakeholders and thought leaders in Washington. The federal strategy may provide openings to discuss emerging Trust interests around Higher Education Act reauthorization (e.g., preserving Pell Grants and incentivizing continuous enrollment, and more equitable access to Work-Study), Perkins reauthorization (stronger alignment with career pathways and guided pathway approaches), and job training funds tied to infrastructure spending.