



One in a series for Redesigning Education and Workforce Systems

► Skills- and Competency-based Approaches to Education

Why it Matters

Changes in the labor market driven by automation, artificial intelligence, and the rapidly evolving nature of skills have accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis. Individuals and educational institutions that were struggling before 2020 now face additional challenges. In particular, the traditional model of postsecondary education—centered around the gradual accumulation of course credit hours and credentials—no longer adequately meets the learning needs and abilities of workers and students or the demands of employers in the modern economy.

Today's students and workers must prepare for in-demand jobs quickly and continually learn new skills throughout their careers. They need education and training offerings that are affordable and flexible, so they can learn without neglecting their work and personal obligations. They want the ability to study at their own pace rather than adhering to rigid schedules and seat time requirements. They also need a way to get postsecondary credit for skills and competencies they already possess and that employers value. Meanwhile, employers have begun to hire people based on their skills and expertise, not just the degrees they hold.

The postsecondary and employer ecosystems need to evolve together to develop agile, flexible educational programs and learning models that are responsive to the evolving priorities of the labor market. Acceleration strategies, such as competency-based education and prior learning assessments, embody such an approach by making demonstrated mastery of skills the primary criteria for recognizing competency, conferring credentials, and assessing an individual's readiness for a job or a career.

Current Challenges

- Federal and state postsecondary policies are antiquated and focus exclusively on seat time and credential attainment, prolonging the time needed to earn credentials and making skills-based education financially inaccessible to many.
- Many existing competency-based education approaches are not sufficiently responsive to the demands of the labor market and do not provide timely training for skills that are in demand.
- There is a lack of transparency and uniformity in the way colleges and employers communicate about skills, requiring both parties to change their approach, and necessitating the development of an infrastructure for skills-based hiring.

What's Needed

A skills-based education and employment infrastructure that embraces outcomes-focused innovations and recognizes people's skills—no matter where or how they acquired those skills—as the principal measure of how much they've learned, the credentials they're qualified to receive, and their ability to do a job.

What State Policymakers Can Do

Foundational Steps

- ▶ Re-invest in statewide longitudinal data systems to document students' education and labor market outcomes, to ensure skills-based training programs achieve high-quality outcomes. The system should collect labor market outcomes data and also allow linkages between competencies validated and work experiences.

Advanced Steps

- ▶ Establish policies to expand competency-based education (CBE) programs by addressing barriers to the implementation of CBE through state accreditation, financing, and financial aid requirements that often limit the growth and accessibility of CBE delivery. This effort should also include technical assistance to high schools and postsecondary institutions to help them design and implement CBE programs, advise educators about how to effectively teach CBE, build shared language around competencies, and create a common assessment repository to improve skills transparency and portability.
- ▶ Expand the implementation of prior learning assessments (PLA) and the practice of awarding credit or advanced placement for competencies gained on the job or in prior educational programs. Provide tools and technical assistance to colleges and workforce systems to establish and implement PLAs, permit the use of state financial aid to pay for such assessments, and reward institutions for awarding credit for prior learning.

Transformational Steps

- ▶ Support the development of “passports” listing individuals' skills and credentials, and ensure that those passports are recognized across educational institutions, workforce systems, and employers to enable seamless transitions between learning and employment opportunities. State efforts to support such an initiative may include convening meetings of key stakeholders and funding pilot programs that utilize innovative technologies like blockchain to ensure that passport data is portable and verifiable. States should also support research and development projects, with a specific focus on the development of uniform data standards to ensure that passport systems are interoperable, so that educators and employers can share data on skill demands and skills training in real time.

State Spotlights

Illinois

In partnership with 74 public and private institutions and multiple state agencies, the Illinois Board of Higher Education created Gateways to Opportunity, a competency-based system of preparing, credentialing, and offering professional development opportunities to early childhood educators. The effort aligned participating institutions' early childhood education curriculums to the competencies required by the state agency that licenses early childhood educators. Early results indicate that the program helps the state meet increasing demand for early childhood educators, provides teachers with equitable opportunities to build and demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and enables teachers to advance more rapidly in their careers.



Kansas

Recognizing the importance of the skills and knowledge people acquire outside of the classroom, the Kansas Board of Regents provides recommended guidelines for evaluating and awarding postsecondary credit for prior learning, including credit for military experience. The goal is to create a consistent and transparent means by which learners can advance toward credentials or degrees, regardless of where or how they obtain their education and skills. All public colleges and universities in Kansas can establish specific credit for prior learning policies that are aligned with their institutional missions, but as they develop those policies, they are encouraged to refer to a guidebook in which the board of regents outlines best practices for offering postsecondary credit for prior learning. The board also ensures that the fees students are asked to pay reflect actual administrative and assessment costs, not the number of credits awarded.



Featured JFF Resources

Direct Assessment CBE: A Blueprint for Community College Leaders.

This JFF report is designed to serve as a resource for community college leaders who are launching direct assessment competency-based education (CBE) programs. Direct assessment CBE requires significant changes to policy, teaching, learning, and business operations that must be addressed strategically. The Blueprint breaks down the implementation process into seven distinct phases, outlines key activities for each phase, and provides curated resources and frameworks to support site-level work. It also highlights areas in each phase where state or system leaders can support institutions through specific actions.

[Read More Here](#) ▶

State Policy Road Map for an Equitable Economic Recovery

This resource is a part of a series that provides state policy solutions focused on people, places, and systems – with the goal of closing equity gaps and driving economic advancement for all. [Read Full Series](#) ▶

