State policy recommendations to ensure that more Americans have the in-demand skills they need to quickly get a job and advance their careers

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Policy Leadership Trust
Introduction

There is an early warning sign that the pandemic could curtail economic growth and opportunity for years to come. This fall, hundreds of thousands of young people and adults delayed—or gave up on—their plans to pursue postsecondary education and training. The steepest enrollment declines were among Black, Indigenous, and low-income learners, who have been hit hardest by the COVID-19 crisis. Without action to help them, these individuals are most at risk of being left behind in an economic recovery.

The Policy Leadership Trust, a national group of community college practitioners established by JFF, is taking a close look at how higher education can pursue demand-driven innovations to become more responsive and relevant to the changing world of work as well as to the changing needs of learners. Policymakers also need to take bold action to foster innovations that will transform our outdated higher education structures and scale the best of what works. With the nation’s capital embroiled in partisanship and gridlock, it is up to the states to make investments and common-sense reforms.

This brief is the first of a five-part series in which the Policy Leadership Trust dives into why policy action is needed, what progress community colleges are making, and what policymakers at the state level should do. The brief analyzes short-term, nondegree training programs. In future reports, the Policy Leadership Trust will explore how to make learning more accessible and relevant; strategies for removing financial barriers to enrollment and completion; how to help students earn while they learn; and increasing equitable access to college.

States must take bold action now, despite tight budgetary times, by prioritizing resources for what matters most and by overhauling legacy policies and structures to spur innovation.

Our students, communities, and employers are counting on us to act.
About the Policy Leadership Trust

The Policy Leadership Trust is a select group of education leaders who let experience be their guide in developing state and federal policies that help students attain credentials for greater success in the labor market. The Policy Leadership Trust brings evidence of what works, speaks to practical considerations and trade-offs of different policy approaches, and voices the needs of students and local communities to ensure that policy designs meet desired goals.

www.jff.org/trust

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

Policy positions of the Policy Leadership Trust represent the prevailing viewpoints of its membership and do not necessarily reflect perspectives of all individual members.
Short-Term Training

Provide more Americans with in-demand skills to quickly get a job and durable pathways to advance their careers

Why Action Is Needed

Americans increasingly are looking for shorter bursts of career-focused training. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, nearly two-thirds of Americans planning to enroll in education and training have shown a preference for nondegree skills training over traditional college degree programs, according to Strada Data Insights. And for good reason—about half of U.S. workers with a high school diploma and professional certification are in good jobs.

Yet, short-term certificate programs amount to less than 10 percent of U.S. undergraduate enrollment. Meanwhile, private companies and other competitors to public education institutions have stepped in to provide short-term, career-focused training in areas where they have demand, such as in specific corporate platforms and coding bootcamps.

Short-term programs, which range from a few weeks to a few months, take far less time to complete than earning a two-year or four-year degree. But there is one key barrier that prevents postsecondary institutions from expanding these programs—paying for them. Short-term programs are not covered by federal or most state financial aid programs, meaning that colleges must charge students, many of whom are from low-income backgrounds, the full price for admission.

What’s Working

To meet the growing demand for short-term training this fall, some states, including Louisiana and Florida, tapped one-time federal stimulus funds to expand training offerings and reduce costs for students.

In Ohio, Lorain County Community College offers nearly 40 training programs that can be completed in 16 weeks or less and that result in an industry-recognized credential in fields including business, health care, IT, and manufacturing. Lorain has made many of the programs tuition-free for students by piecing together several funding sources, including from health and human services and workforce development agencies and philanthropic organizations, on top of its share of federal stimulus dollars. Lorain is also leveraging Ohio’s newly enacted TechCred policy to provide a $3,000 scholarship for students enrolled in micro-credential programs.
What Policymakers Should Do

While colleges are coming up with their own solutions for adding more short-term training to their offerings, state policymakers can play an important role by providing greater access to financial aid and rethinking requirements for earning a degree. Here are the Policy Leadership Trust’s recommendations:

- Make short-term training eligible for state financial aid.
- Provide state funding to colleges to deliver short-term and noncredit workforce programs.
- Uphold quality in short-term training and credential programs.
- Streamline pathways to advanced degrees by “stacking” short-term credentials and awarding credit for prior learning.

However laudable, a patchwork approach to financing short-term training is not sustainable or scalable across the nation. States need to rethink their higher education financing models and policies to make rapid reskilling a permanent feature of higher education and one that can put students on a durable pathway to economic advancement.

One option is to fund postsecondary education institutions at the same rate for student enrollment in short-term training as in traditional degree programs. One state that’s pursuing this option is North Carolina, with its noncredit and credit parity funding formula. Another approach is to make short-term training eligible for state financial aid, as the Virginia FastForward and Arkansas Future and Workforce Challenge grant programs do.

Yet increasing access with financial support is not enough. States also need to ensure that short-term training programs are high quality and add value to the students’ college and career pathways. Virginia’s FastForward program, for example, applies a pay-for-performance model to financially reward colleges for student completions and employment outcomes.

While attaining a short-term credential will prepare students to enter a career field, earning increases from short-term training tends to be modest or may even disappear over time. This is why it is so important that training participants not stop with one credential and that they are encouraged to continue their education.

One way to do this is to make it faster and cheaper to complete a college degree and advance in a career field. State policy can help by developing infrastructure and incentives for awarding credit for prior learning, as the California system does, and by allowing colleges to embed certificates within degree program requirements, like Wisconsin’s Technical College system.
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