POLICY MEETS PATHWAYS

A STATE POLICY AGENDA FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

By Lara K. Couturier | DECEMBER 2014

College leaders embracing pathways reforms are signaling a willingness to commit to transformational change. They are honestly discussing the troubling aspects of their student progression and completion rates, examining every step of the student experience, and redesigning how they interact with students from the point of interest through to completion.

Colleges are undertaking these reforms embedded in state policy environments that are often outdated, driven by the wrong incentives, or incompatible with colleges' efforts. States need to redouble their efforts to modernize policies, and develop more effective approaches that support campuses and build capacity to strengthen implementation. To support and sustain colleges that are improving student outcomes, state policymakers need to DesignForScale.

DesignForScale is Jobs for the Future's approach to helping state policymakers create a visionary policy environment: an environment that encourages and supports colleges to implement integrated, evidence-based student success reforms at scale. We call first for states to undertake a deep analysis of their existing policies, and then to prioritize the implementation of policies that support colleges building structured or guided pathways. We also outline a series of other structures states need to build, such as deep and engaging professional development for faculty and staff, creation of advisory boards that draw in key stakeholders, and support for colleges undertaking a deep and consequential analysis of their own institutional policies and practices. Altogether, DesignForScale will enhance the breadth and integration of structured pathways.

The full report, *Policy Meets Pathways: A State Policy Agenda for Transformational Change*, is available at
http://www.jff.org/publications/policy-meets-pathways-state-policy-agenda-transformational-change

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

COMPLETION BY DESIGN

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE ACTION: DesignForScale

RECOMMENDATION 1
CREATE STATE POLICY CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT COLLEGES' EFFORTS TO UNDERTAKE COMPREHENSIVE, INTEGRATED REDESIGN

STEP 1: CHARGE A TEAM WITH ANALYZING THE EXISTING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

It's time for national leaders, state officials, and system heads to put efforts to bolster completion on a new trajectory by analyzing the extent to which state policies support the colleges that are trying to do right by their students. The report recommends that states begin by creating a team to analyze the existing policy environment, systematically evaluating the policies and supporting structures in place statewide. To facilitate this process, Jobs for the Future has developed the DesignForScale: State Policy Self-Assessment Tool designed to lead state teams through a deliberate and thoughtful analysis.

STEP 2: PRIORITIZE POLICY CHANGES IN SUPPORT OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

The report urges states to implement seven high-leverage policy priorities meant to serve large percentages of low-income and nontraditional students. Key policy priorities need to "design for scale" and tackle thorny policy issues that states often avoid, by:

> **Streamlining program requirements and creating clearly structured programs of study** to help students gain traction toward degrees rather than be stymied by an overwhelming array of course options, unclear program requirements and a lack of guidance.

> **Encouraging colleges to redesign developmental education into accelerated on-ramps to programs of study** that include strong advising, student entry into program streams or meta-majors with developmental education courses relevant to that stream, as well as comprehensive "wraparound" services that provide everything from counseling and financial literacy to supplemental instruction.

> **Supporting colleges in developing and implementing a suite of research-based wraparound student support services** that propel students through to completion, including redesigned student intake procedures, comprehensive advising with integrated career counseling, early alert systems and educational program mapping.

> **Ensuring that structured pathways lead to credentials and durable competencies** that allow students to build on their skill sets, continuously adapt to thrive in the fast-paced and constantly evolving global economy, and access robust career opportunities.

> **Supporting colleges' strategic use of data**, with a particular focus on creating statewide data systems that monitor students' progress from postsecondary education into the labor market. State efforts also should build the capacity of institutions to use student data and real-time labor market information.

> **Creating financial incentives**, such as performance-based funding for institutions and performance-based scholarships that connect financial aid awards to students' achievement of certain milestones—such as attending advisor sessions, completing courses, and returning in subsequent semesters.

> **Investing professional development dollars** in statewide structures that create intensive, authentic faculty engagement and link efforts to increase college completion to a deeper focus on teaching and learning.

RECOMMENDATION 2
BUILD STATE STRUCTURES TO SET THE CONDITIONS FOR SCALED REFORM

The report also calls on states to develop state-level structures that can support these scaled-up improvements. States can leverage their convening power, access to colleges, authority over innovation funding, and communications vehicles to:

> **Help colleges set the conditions for sustained improvement through a systematic self-assessment of institutional policies and practices.** Scaling up and embedding reforms across an institution requires strong alignment of institutional policies with reform efforts, responsive leadership, strategically targeted professional development, and clear mechanisms for planning and resource allocation. To facilitate this process, JFF has developed the DesignForScale: College Self-Assessment Tool to help states support their colleges in a deep and consequential effort to look at every institutional practice and policy and analyze the degree to which all of those support (or don't support) student success.

> **Create structures for authentic statewide faculty engagement.** States and colleges can encourage ongoing and meaningful involvement of each institution's faculty and staff by creating deliberate opportunities for authentic discussion, sharing, learning, and long-term action. North Carolina's Student Success Learning Institute, for example, brings together teams from each campus (comprising the chief academic and student development officer, the research director, and a faculty member) to participate in convenings, webinars and courses focused on topics such as identifying performance indicators, creating structured programs of study, and redesigning advising systems.

> **Engage diverse stakeholders systemically.** States can benefit from stakeholder boards that help identify and resolve policy and funding challenges that are barriers to student success, and make recommendations at the institutional, state agency, and legislative levels. Texas' Student Success Council, for example, brings together a diverse group of members representing all stakeholders to propose policy changes and conditions that improve the success of students in the state's 50 community college districts.

> **Create and support a statewide Student Success Center.** Growing directly out of a decade of hard work to dramatically boost student completion rates in the community college–through national improvement efforts such as Achieving the Dream, the Developmental Education Initiative, Breaking Through, and Completion by Design–Student Success Centers organize a state's community colleges around common action to accelerate their efforts to improve student persistence and completion. Seven states–Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas–operate these centers with support from the Kresge Foundation. College and association leaders launched the centers to establish a statewide, cross-college support venue for collaboration and faculty engagement.

> **Join cross-state learning and action networks.** Because colleges and states face similar challenges, state and campus leaders typically benefit from collaborating across state lines to share ideas and co-develop solutions. In JFF's Postsecondary State Policy Network, state and campus officials from the largest and most diverse states regularly meet to share information about challenges and solutions, review research and state actions, and analyze ideas from their different contexts and perspectives. JFF facilitates interactions through face-to-face meetings, webinars, and cross-state affinity groups and conversations. The Network was a key player in Virginia and North Carolina's efforts to redesign developmental education, Ohio's introduction of its performance-based funding model, and Massachusetts' adoption of meta-majors and a new multiple measures placement process.

The past decade of the college completion movement was the right work at the right time. But 10 years of experimentation and research have led to an inescapable conclusion: It is time for both states and community colleges to be more systematic, serious, and organized about designing visionary, integrated reforms to be implemented at scale to achieve meaningful and equitable results for our students. This report helps show how that can be done based on some of the best examples in the field.