

THE WORKFORCE PLAYBOOK:  
A COMMUNITY COLLEGE GUIDE TO DELIVERING  
EXCELLENT CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

## Executive Summary

**Even in the midst of an economic boom**, approximately 27 million adults in the United States remain unemployed or stuck in low-wage jobs. At the same time, nearly two in five U.S. employers report difficulty filling jobs. They struggle to find educated, qualified workers, even in fields that offer strong wages.

Very often, the missing link is a college education. More than ever, college is a prerequisite for economic mobility and financial stability. In the United States, people with a bachelor's degree earn 44 percent more over their working years than those with only a high school diploma. And approximately 15.7 million, or 24 percent, of the nation's well-paying jobs require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree.<sup>1</sup>

To help bridge this opportunity gap, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program has developed *The Workforce Playbook*.

Our research has shown that some community colleges do better than others delivering what students need to be successful in the next stage of their lives. In 2016, Aspen and CCRC released *The Transfer Playbook*, a practical, research-based guide that highlighted the practices of those community colleges most effective in partnering with universities to serve students aiming to attain a bachelor's degree. *The Transfer Playbook* now serves as a guide for many colleges and several states committed to significantly improving outcomes for transfer students.

*The Workforce Playbook* takes a similar approach, with the goal of improving community colleges' ability to deliver talent for communities and enable social mobility for students, either right out of community college or after further education. Through quantitative and qualitative research on practices at 30 high-performing community colleges, and using concrete examples and step-by-step instruction, Aspen highlights what colleges can do to build more effective workforce programs.

The high-impact strategies effective colleges engage in fall in four areas.

### 1 ADVANCE A VISION FOR TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Most community colleges have an approach to workforce development that is simultaneously passive and proactive: They respond to employer requests to build and improve programs, and periodically work to attract new employers to their region. Community colleges that achieve excellent labor market outcomes do more: Their leaders develop a vision that maximizes the college's potential to promote social mobility and develop talent within the regional economy, rooted in a full understanding of the demographic and economic contexts in which they operate. Leaders establish routines that enable the college to consider how, exactly, the institution can best contribute to the region—its populations and its employers—and how it must improve to do so. This vision provides a lodestar for both internal decision-making and external partnership strategies; it enables colleges to make the tradeoffs and tough decisions that inevitably arise in the course of this work.

To develop a culture centered on student outcomes beyond graduation and an intentionality about ensuring equity in those outcomes, colleges must:

- Define labor market outcomes as a central component of student success, developing a college culture that strives to deliver strong employment and earning results alongside learning and completion outcomes.
- Understand the state and dynamics of the regional labor market—paying particular attention to growing and contracting fields that offer jobs with strong wages—as well as the regional population, particularly with respect to diversity and access for growing and historically underserved segments of the community.
- Working consistently to align the offerings of the college overall—and specific programs—to the needs of employers and population in the college's service area.

<sup>1</sup> See *Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/3pathways/>

## 2 DELIVER HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAMS ALIGNED TO REGIONAL NEEDS

All community colleges have established processes for the development and periodic review of their programs. What distinguishes colleges that achieve exceptional outcomes is that these processes are not just organizational routines. Rather, they are designed and implemented as strategic opportunities to deepen faculty and employer engagement in students' learning and to continually revisit how well programs are meeting the needs of students, employers, and the regional economy so that programs are continuously improved.

Colleges with high-quality workforce programs and excellent outcomes have built intentional, effective systems to:

- Execute a rigorous program approval process aligned to the college's vision
- Define needed skills, then credentials, in collaboration with employers
- Include meaningful work-based learning in all workforce and career and technical education programs
- Hire and empower exceptional workforce leaders to guide strategy and implement programs
- Maintain program quality through honest and actionable feedback

## 3 TAKE INTENTIONAL ACTION TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' CAREER GOALS FROM PRE-MATRICULATION THROUGH POST-GRADUATION

Few students arrive at college with a crystal-clear idea of where they're headed and how to get there. Even those who have clarity about their direction may not know what programs to enter or courses to take or, what steps to take to move from college into a career. At excellent colleges, leaders strive to make their institutions conduits to economic opportunity, to ensure that opportunity extends equitably to all populations, and that advisors and teachers build students' aspirations rather than constrict choices based on assumptions about interests or abilities. They reach out to diverse and marginalized populations. They help students of all backgrounds make informed decisions about their program of study, recognizing that even the most self-directed students may be basing their decisions on incomplete or inaccurate information. They make career guidance an integral part of the student experience rather than an optional resource, and focus career advising on helping students see the full range

of their own potential options. And, ultimately, they do not see the student's journey as complete until that student is employed in a good job, earning a living wage. These colleges own the student experience, from before students matriculate until they attain a good job.

Colleges that support students effectively:

- Conduct intentional outreach and provide early support to ensure broad and equitable access to high-quality programs
- Create onboarding processes to support productive program exploration and informed decision-making
- Teach career and life skills throughout the student experience
- Help students get good jobs

## 4 DEVELOP RESPONSIVE, MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS CENTERED ON HONEST FEEDBACK AND RECIPROCAL SUPPORT

Community colleges with excellent workforce outcomes consistently adapt to deliver what employers need. Through strong, trusting relationships, college leaders, faculty, and staff come to deeply understand employers' and students' needs. They establish intentional strategies and processes to meet those needs and pivot rapidly when technology and student characteristics evolve.

Developing and maintaining industry relationships requires sustained, thoughtful work. Effective strategic engagement goes well beyond twice-annual advisory board meetings and other basic routines. Fostering, sustaining, and growing employer partnerships requires that colleges:

- Select and engage employers based on honest, data-informed conversations
- Create easy on-ramps to partnership
- Establish business-friendly systems to manage partners
- Convene industries and other critical partners for scaled, regional impact

Making significant improvements in these four areas is challenging, but worth it. By adopting practices common at the excellent community colleges featured in *The Workforce Playbook*, colleges will be able to catalyze opportunity for thousands more students and strengthen communities throughout the country. ■