

How Policy Can Better Support Career Advancement

Federal, State, and Local Policy Opportunities to Help People Advance to Middle-Skill Jobs

What can policymakers do to support career advancement?

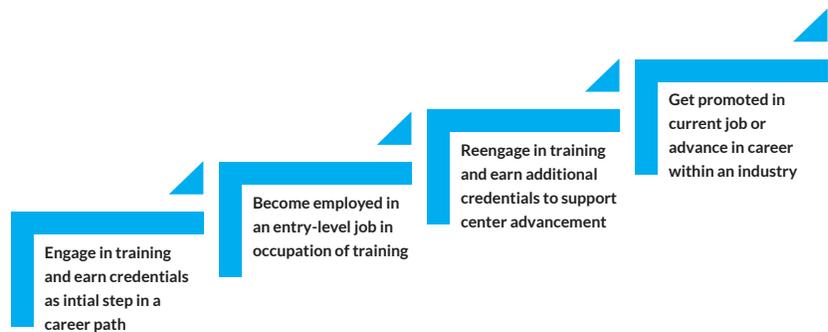
- Encourage or require cross-system or cross-organizational partnerships and activities.
- Issue guidance and offer resources to those receiving federal funding to build career pathways.
- Better structure financial aid so students receive better guidance on course selection and receive support in their persistence or reengagement in college.
- Require agencies and organizations receiving government funding to engage employers and industry and ensure they have the resources they need.
- Encourage performance measurement and research on career advancement.

In today’s economy, Americans with little to no postsecondary education and training may languish in low-skill, low-wage jobs with few options to advance to higher-paying, more-secure jobs. What can policymakers do to help people advance to “middle skill” jobs?

Figure 1 shows how people ideally progress along a career pathway—a model that supports postsecondary and job advancement to improve career opportunities for adults and youth.

FIGURE 1

How Individuals Ideally Progress along a Career Pathway



Sources: Lauren Eyster and Semhar Gebrekristos, “Fulfilling the Promise of Career Support Pathways: Strategies that Support Career Advancement” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018).

CHALLENGES

State and local workforce, education, and other systems may not be well connected to build career pathways to support advancement.

There is a lack of clearly articulated career pathways to degrees and resources to guide students' progress. WIOA and the recent Perkins reauthorization encourages but doesn't require the use of career pathways models that support advancement to guide workforce and career and technical education activities.

Financial constraints for students may hinder advancement for students, especially those who may drop out of college. Students who used federal or state financial aid for courses that do not count toward a credential (e.g., courses outside majors, developmental education courses) may use up their aid before completing their program of study. Students who drop out of college may have outstanding debt with the college they once attended.

Employers, who spend billions of dollars on training their current employees, are often disconnected from local workforce systems and do not leverage resources available in the community.

Mountains of student data exist, but analysis to better understand successes and challenges in career advancement is rarely available for policymakers.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLICY

Encourage or require cross-system or cross-organizational partnerships and activities. Federal and state policymakers can encourage states and local areas to build cross-system partnerships through existing legislation, such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), and new legislation. In addition, state and local policymakers can develop guidance that requires organizations and institutions receiving funding in different systems (e.g., workforce, education, economic development, human services) to coordinate activities and develop career pathways and upskilling for workers.

Leverage existing federal funding to build career pathways that explicitly include career advancement at the state and local level. Federal and state policymakers could issue policy guidance and provide resources to workforce development boards, community colleges, and others receiving federal funding to build career pathways. States can also develop a cross-systems framework for career pathways that coordinates career pathways development at the state and local level.

Better structure financial aid so students receive better guidance on course selection and help to support persistence or reengagement in college. College counseling to help students take only the courses they need to complete their education and training program could be required for students receiving federal or state financial aid. Policymakers could also develop policies and fund activities by state higher education systems and individual institutions to fund debt forgiveness programs that encourage students to return to college and complete their degree.

Require government agencies and organizations receiving government funding to engage employers and industry through partnerships or other coordinated efforts. Policymakers can ensure that technical assistance on employer engagement and resources for staffing who directly work with employers is available. Learning the language that employers speak and better understanding their training practices and needs can inform more effective collaboration.

Provide guidance and create incentives for conducting performance measurement and research to track and assess career advancement for adult and youth to better inform policy and practice. State and local workforce and education systems could report on the outcomes of students as they go through K-12, postsecondary education, and into the workforce. Analyses should help identify the successes in and barriers to advancing in postsecondary education and work and careers. They should also evaluate career advancement strategies to understand what works and what doesn't.

For more information, please visit www.urban.org/workforce.