



# A New National Approach to Career Navigation for Working Learners

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# Introduction and summary

Americans are struggling to find decent work at decent pay, and their search for a good job is hampered by the nation's lack of quality, coordinated career development services. Most could benefit greatly from easily accessible assistance on how to plan, build, and navigate a career. Working learners are particularly vulnerable. They have no postsecondary credential that could help them advance, yet they cannot afford to stop working to attend an education or training program full time.

The wide-ranging stories that friends and relatives tell about how they landed their jobs brings the need for a more coherent and accessible career navigation system into sharper focus. A lucky few always knew what they wanted to do, could afford a quality college education, and found good jobs in their chosen fields. But many people bounce from job to job, unsure how to find a career that fits their abilities and interests or unable to pay for the education that will get them the work they want. Effective career navigation assists individuals in determining a career path, understanding the requirements for the jobs they seek, and accessing the education and training needed to achieve their goals.

Two anecdotes, based on interviews with workers across the country conducted for this paper, illustrate the variety of experiences with career navigation in the United States:

A young man who is the son of factory workers nearly dropped out of high school five years ago. While he did graduate, his basic academic skills were so low that he could not pass the military's entry exam, which eliminated a potentially promising career path that many of his peers had taken. Compounding his underdeveloped academic abilities was his complete ignorance about how to explore career options and make a choice—or where to turn for help. Since high school he has drifted from town to town, living with relatives, working odd jobs, and squandering the early work years that are essential to establishing a career. A couple of minor drug possession charges further weaken his prospects.

A young California woman knew soon after finishing high school that her minimum-wage, fast-food job wouldn't build her much of a future. But it took 15 years of part-time work, part-time school, and a lot of help to find her way to a family-sustaining career. It was only after seeing a flier in a welfare office that she enrolled in training that enabled her to move from being a medical assistant, to a lab technician, to a certified nursing assistant. Now she is working toward becoming a nurse.

These vignettes highlight several distinct problems people experience while seeking decent work at decent pay. But they share a fundamental theme: Each of these individuals could greatly benefit from easily accessible help on how to plan, build, and navigate a career. Both have suffered from the nation's lack of quality, coordinated career development services.

The California woman's story is particularly significant as an example of the nation's rapidly growing population of working learners—the focus of this report. These women and men, who usually are parents, must work and attend school at the same time. They do not have a postsecondary credential, but they cannot afford to drop out of the labor market and pursue education full time. By one estimate, 75 million working learners are trying to balance work, school, and family.<sup>1</sup>

President Barack Obama challenged all Americans to commit to at least one year of higher education or job training for their own sake and for the sake of the country's economy. But working learners will find it difficult if not impossible to achieve this goal without a detailed, sensible plan to follow. The vast majority will need professional help to identify the education that aligns with their skills and interests and that will enable them to secure jobs that pay family-supporting wages.

This paper details both the inadequacy of the career navigation assistance now available and why the United States needs a new approach. The first section describes the urgent need, which has been exacerbated by recent trends in the economy. The second section showcases promising models of career navigation that have emerged—created by community colleges, employers, labor unions, public workforce systems, and community-based organizations—but remain small boutique enterprises. The third section envisions a more robust national approach to career navigation services for working adults and explores both design principles and challenges. Finally, the paper recommends next steps and federal policy actions that would move us closer to achieving that vision.

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## Why the United States needs a national career navigation model

The United States lacks a coherent, planned career navigation system. Such a system was unnecessary when the primary prerequisites for many middle-class jobs were physical strength and endurance. But as the nation shifted to an economy based on information and knowledge, education and skills became the paths to success. And gaining that preparation for work is not easy.

Career navigation supports have emerged from a variety of sources but in highly uneven and disorganized ways. The assistance today is a hodgepodge of different types and intensities of guidance offered by different institutions and people with varying levels of qualifications. On top of all this, demand for career navigation services is strong and expected to grow.

In short, the United States needs a new national approach to career navigation for two major reasons:

- Ongoing economic volatility combined with the rising demand for highly skilled employees, make it more and more difficult for workers to reach wise decisions or succeed on their own.
- Employers need efficient ways to develop and access a highly skilled workforce to stay competitive.

Both these needs are increasing as the economy evolves from an industrial to a knowledge base.

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## Promising models of career navigation

Outstanding examples of effective programs for workers and learners at various stages in their careers exist within the assortment of career navigation assistance services in the United States. Promising models emerged from the range of entities typically providing career development assistance to working learners: community colleges, the public workforce system, community-based organizations, labor unions, and employers. Most, if not all, however, remain boutique programs for the time being, limited in scale and impact, and with minimal funding available to do more.

The promising career development programs described in this paper share distinct characteristics that contribute to their effectiveness. In each case the programs:

- Tailor services to local labor market trends, which enables the programs to provide the most relevant and useful career information
- Tailor services to individual clients' specific needs—covering a broad range of education and training levels
- Form local partnerships with community-based organizations, colleges, and employers

In many cases the programs also:

- Provide specialized training to staff to help them understand how to serve low-income, low-skilled populations most effectively
- Regularly track and review progress to ensure that they continue to meet client needs

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## A national framework

The United States must address the shortcomings in its current career navigation services, particularly for working learners. The nation needs an intentional, comprehensive approach that builds upon strengths in the field.

## Vision

A national approach to improving career navigation services would focus on ensuring that any worker, at any time in his or her career, could get information and resources for making smart career decisions. The assistance could be self-directed or guided by support from a professional depending on individual needs.

Further, the system would provide assessment tools to help people better understand their own strengths, weaknesses, skills, and interests. It would supply information about a broad range of career options, local labor market demand, education and skills required, and typical compensation. People could find information on specific local education and training programs, including course offerings, graduation rates, and financial aid.

Any individual could create an online career profile describing his or her education, training, credentials, work experience, and other relevant information. Each profile could include an individualized career navigation plan, which could be updated at any time and used consistently throughout the individual's working lifetime. Some aspects of the profile could be made available to potential employers.

More intensive services such as career coaching, advising, and comprehensive counseling also would be available depending on each person's needs. Working learners and job seekers could connect with others through social networking technology and receive peer support, advice, and encouragement. Up-to-date, career-relevant information could be accessed electronically.

## Key design principles

The following key design principles should frame a national conversation about how to expand the nation's career navigation services:

- Provide continuous and lifelong access to career navigation
- Increase capacity to meet national demand
- Provide high-quality service that conforms to appropriate common minimum standards
- Integrate multiple service providers, with each offering appropriate services for particular populations or clients
- Provide unbiased, objective assistance that is carefully tailored to individual needs
- Empower each individual with career navigation skills
- Provide efficient, streamlined services, fully utilizing technology for maximum scale

## Design questions

A number of choices and challenges come with scaling up career navigation services to meet national demand. The following questions cover the most important topics the United States must consider:

- What should be coordinated nationally and what should be left to regional or local variation?

- What is the appropriate balance between high-tech and high-touch face-to-face approaches to career guidance?
- Which services should be networked and decentralized and which should be more centrally governed and planned?
- To what extent can career navigation services be standardized and how much individualization is needed?

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## Recommendations for next steps

The federal government can and should play a significant role in meeting the need for a national approach to career navigation services. We recommend two steps:

- A national communications campaign to raise awareness of this pressing need
- Extensive research and development to better evaluate existing resources and test new and scaled-up models

### Communications campaign

- **Use the bully pulpit:** Build from President Obama's challenge to the nation that all Americans earn at least one year of higher education or job training, and capitalize on federal changes to unemployment insurance and Pell grant programs. The secretaries of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services should build career navigation into their talking points regarding the administration's postsecondary education agenda. Further, the respective departments should incorporate ideas for a new national model of career navigation into program planning for a more robust education and workforce system and a higher-skilled workforce.
- **Seed a paradigm shift:** The federal government (Education, Labor, HHS, Commerce), in partnership with business, colleges, unions, and workforce programs, should support a national campaign to raise the awareness of workers, employers, and other stakeholders on the necessity and value of career development services across every person's working life.

### Research and development

- **Map it:** The Office of Vocational and Adult Education at the Department of Education and the Employment Training Administration at the Department of Labor should conduct a joint analysis and assessment of U.S. career development assistance services. Map assets and promising models and note gaps and weaknesses.
- **Develop national standards:** OVAE and ETA should work together to create national standards for all career navigation programs and the professionals who provide the services. Build from research on successful programs as well as on existing national and international models. Tie federal funding to the adoption of these standards and encourage foundations to do so as well.

- **Increase the amount of resources supporting career navigation:** The supply of affordable career navigation assistance falls far short of meeting what’s needed, especially in public and nonprofit systems. To help solve this problem the federal government could increase funding for career navigation services through the Workforce Investment Act and other current programs. And by providing matching funds or challenge grants it could provide incentives to state governments and local institutions, such as community colleges, to increase funding for career navigation assistance.
- **Scale up promising models:** Pilot large-scale demonstrations of promising models to test their effectiveness and assess their potential for national scale up.
- **Incubate new ideas:** Engage creative thinkers and pilot bold innovations, especially technology-based solutions. This is an underdeveloped area that could provide the

## Defining terms

The career development field’s lexicon can be confusing—even “career” has multiple definitions. A variety of terms is used to describe career navigation activities, some interchangeably.

This paper uses the following terms and definitions:

**Career:** The dictionary definition of a career is “an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person’s life and with opportunities for progress.” Many career counseling organizations take the definition a step further, however. The National Career Development association defines career as “the sum total of one’s life experiences, including education, paid and unpaid work, and community, volunteer and family activities.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners defines career as “a lifestyle concept that involves the sequence of work, learning and leisure activities in which one engages throughout a lifetime. Careers are unique to each person and are dynamic; unfolding throughout life. Careers include how persons balance their paid and unpaid work and personal life roles.”<sup>3</sup> This paper will use the more comprehensive definitions supplied by the career development organizations.

**Career development:** The multiple factors—educational, sociological, economic, physical, and chance—that influence the nature and significance of work during an individual’s lifetime.<sup>4</sup> The Canadian standards

define career development as “the lifelong process of managing learning, work, leisure, and transitions in order to move toward a personally determined and evolving preferred future.”<sup>5</sup>

**Career navigation services:** Activities intended to help individuals of any age and at any point in their lives make educational, training, and occupational choices and manage their careers. Such services may be found in secondary schools, colleges, universities, training institutions, public employment services, the workplace, the volunteer or community sector, and the private sector. The activities may take place on an individual or group basis or be in person, on the phone, or via the Internet. Specific services may include the provision of career information, assessment and self-assessment tools, counseling interviews, career education programs, internships, work-search programs, and transition services.

**Career counseling:** Career counseling approaches the work from a clinical, psychological perspective and is more comprehensive than other types of career development services. It applies mental health, psychological, or human development principles.

A career counselor has a master’s degree in counseling, sometimes specifically in career counseling.<sup>6</sup> Career counselors must be licensed by the state in which they practice (except California, which does not have a licensing requirement). The term “career counselor” is often loosely used and not all

cost-effectiveness required to make the system comprehensive, universal, and lifelong. Launch a national competition that rewards research and development grants for promising models of career navigation innovation.

- **Pilot creative financing mechanisms:** “Micro-Pell Grants” and unemployment insurance are two of many creative vehicles for directing more funding toward career navigation for working learners.

The nation’s shortage of high-quality career development services is a problem whose solution is not yet clear. But this paper offers possible first steps for finding that solution. The authors aim to spur a long-overdue national conversation among policymakers, practitioners, and advocates on this critical topic—one that affects individuals, families, employers, communities, and the entire nation.

individuals who refer to themselves this way meet formal qualifications. High school guidance counselors and most college career counselors meet the definition, while “career counselors” in settings such as public workforce development centers and community-based organizations are more closely aligned with the qualifications of an “advisor” or “coach.”

**Career coaching:** Applying principles of quality coaching to encourage, motivate, or inspire individuals to engage in the activities necessary for career development. Career coaches do not engage in career development activities with the client. Rather, they encourage, ask questions of, and motivate clients to engage in the activities themselves. The International Coaching Federation, one of the nation’s top multifaceted coaching programs, defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”<sup>7</sup>

Career coaching provides a lighter touch than career counseling. Certified career coaches earn a certificate through an accredited program such as the National Career Development Association. Most of these programs offer multiple levels of certification as well as certifications in subspecialties such as group coaching. There are few educational prerequisites to become a certified coach. Not all individuals with the title “career coach” are certified career coaches, either. Many career coaches

who work for promising models described in this report are more akin to career “advisors,” as defined below.

**Career advising:** Providing guidance, information, and assistance to an individual engaging in career development. This term is used by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, a national nonprofit leader in adult learning and workforce development that provides career advising services for companies. Unlike “career coaching” and “career counseling,” career advising is not grounded in a broader field of practice. It occupies a middle ground and is the most common level of assistance provided across many different types of organizations.

Career advisors often assess a client’s skills or interests, generally work with a client to develop an action plan, may provide specific information on education or training programs appropriate to the client’s goals, and may provide ongoing assistance for some duration. Most professionals providing this service in public agencies or community-based organizations have college degrees in a field related to education, training, or counseling, and have experience providing career advising assistance. All One-Stop WorkForce Center career counselors in Minnesota are required to have a Global Career Development Facilitator credential, which is now being offered to Career and Technical Education personnel at Minnesota state colleges and universities.

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