

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Supporting Postsecondary Success in Delaware: A Landscape Analysis of Student Opportunities

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ANALYSIS CONDUCTED BY:



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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To view the full report online, visit [bit.ly/PostSecLandscape](https://bit.ly/PostSecLandscape)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the nation, far too many young people lack the knowledge and skills required to complete a postsecondary degree or earn a credential with currency in the labor market. As a result, young people struggle to enter and succeed in careers, while employers are increasingly unable to meet their workforce needs. In addition, residents with ties to their community are missing opportunities to land well-paying jobs locally.

Since the 1970s, there has been a considerable decline in the number of jobs in the United States that pay family-supporting wages but do not require postsecondary credentials. Although the labor markets have changed, the primary institution that prepares youth to join the new economy—school—has not. The new service- and information-based economy requires specialized technical skills and knowledge, strong employability or “soft skills,” and qualities such as creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to work in a collaborative team.

Delaware has emerged as a national leader among states working to improve postsecondary education and career outcomes for young people. Delaware’s rich history of strong public-private partnerships has positioned leaders in the state to launch important initiatives focused on college and career readiness and access that engage stakeholders across all sectors. While impressive initiatives and policies are in place at the state level, last fall, the Delaware Business Roundtable Education Committee, the Delaware Community Foundation, the Delaware Department of Education, the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, and the United Way of Delaware asked a critical question for which they did not have a ready answer:

***How well are college and career readiness, advising, and support services supporting students across the state?***

## PROJECT CONTEXT

These organizations partnered with Jobs for the Future to help answer this question in two ways. A researcher carried out and analyzed data from interviews, focus groups, professional meetings, and surveys across Delaware’s three counties over the course of six months. Over 300 individuals were engaged including: K-12 educators and counselors, postsecondary education institutions, community-based organizations, policymakers, public high school students and out-of-school youth.

Additionally, Delaware partners convened a panel of six national experts to review the draft findings and recommendations, as well as to contribute their own expertise. The information gathered informed the recommendations for how Delaware can expand access to the college

Over **300 stakeholders** engaged, including:

- **41 Interviews**
- **235 Student Surveys**
- **7 Focus Groups**
- **3 Professional Meetings**
- **6 National Experts**

and career readiness, advising, and support services needed for students to make good choices and succeed in their post-high school plans.

The researcher and the expert panel began their efforts on common ground, including a set of research questions, knowledge of Delaware's key assets, and data on current student outcomes. Detailed information can be found in the full report.

The project aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the characteristics, assets, and barriers of the college and career readiness, access, and success support services available to Delaware students?
- What are the key themes and findings that emerge from stakeholder interviews, surveys, and focus groups? How should Delaware consider aligning, expanding, or growing services to better serve the needs of students?

The landscape analysis was not intended to be a large-scale evaluation that determines the impact or success of college and career readiness structures or initiatives in Delaware. Nor does the analysis provide a detailed list of programs, activities, or outcome measures available in the state. Rather, it was designed to systemically document the assets and barriers (perceived or actual) that are associated with postsecondary readiness in Delaware.

The analysis uncovered a number of key postsecondary readiness supports and activities that make Delaware an example for the nation. Strengths of Delaware's system, along with assets, include:

- **Vision:** Delaware has a strong state-level vision for the future, which aligns partners, drives change, and has led to Delaware emerging as a national leader in this space. For example, the Vision Coalition of Delaware's [Student Success 2025](#) is a comprehensive, collaborative plan to ensure that every Delaware student has the knowledge, training, and work experience needed to pursue a meaningful, family-supporting career by 2025.
- **Alignment:** There are robust college and career readiness partnerships between school systems, community-based organizations, government, philanthropies, institutions of higher education, and businesses. These partnerships are evident through strong state supports such as [College Application Month](#), [SEED/Inspire Scholarships](#), [text alerts](#) for information on college admissions, and student success plans. Strategic alignment of state and federal education and workforce development plans are strong assets in Delaware's college and career sphere. This includes the alignment of Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, and the Carl D. Perkins state plans with the [Delaware Pathways Strategic Plan](#).
- **Size:** Delaware's size allows good ideas to scale quickly, with only 137,000 students, one community college system, one workforce development board, 19 school districts, and 44 high schools.

- **Track Record:** Delaware has a history of effective public-private partnerships. In 2010, Delaware was one of the first states to win the national Race to the Top competition, gaining \$119 million in funding to improve state and district education systems. Additionally, Delaware has quickly launched and expanded [Delaware Pathways](#) into 38 high schools. Pathways are high school curricula and experiences that align with state labor market demands, provide opportunities for students to earn industry-recognized credentials and college credits, and are consistent with postsecondary learning.
- **Leadership:** Public- and private-sector leaders are committed to this work, as is evidenced through leadership across multiple education and workforce development organizations, and strong political leadership.

## OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

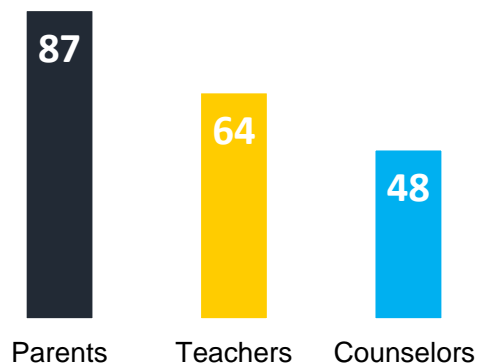
The analysis identified key service types, activities, locations, and outcomes, and identified gaps in services and approaches. Four broad themes emerged from the analysis, and opportunities for further work developed from the research findings. Findings are explained in detail in the full report. The findings are not surprising, and while the focus is specifically on Delaware, the themes would likely apply to many states in the country.

### I. Rethink College and Career Advising:

Professional school counselors are an essential piece of the puzzle, however, a new approach that utilizes all educators in college and career planning, engages parents, and coordinates state, school, and community-based services is desired to address broad student needs. Findings include:

- Counselor capacity is limited, and schools have only partial awareness of outside services.
- The state lacks a systematic approach to engaging all educators in a culture of college and career planning.

Percent of students that indicated **who helped them** in preparing for their future after high school:



- Parents play the primary role in informing students of options for career and college.

### II. Address Student Mental Health Needs:

Counselors, educators, and community-based organizations address students' mental health needs, but educators and community organizations could better understand current services available and how to scale best practices. Findings include:

- High levels of risk and stress present immediate challenges to youth for longer-term planning.
- Counselors and community-based organizations provide much-needed services, but services are not effectively coordinated and referrals are not frequently made.

**III. Expand Access to Support Services and Equity of Distribution:** Race, geography, citizenship, and English learner status are reported as having a differential impact on access to high-quality services that meet student needs. Current programming does not adequately cover postsecondary and career preparation topics (such as persistence/completion of postsecondary education and affordability), and student demand is not being met. Findings include:

- Academic inequities and access to college and career programming negatively impact postsecondary preparation, access, and success.
- School-based and community-based organizations require additional supports to develop cross cultural competency.
- Current programming does not adequately cover all postsecondary and career preparation options to help youth achieve these goals.

**IV. Leverage Existing Resources:** Cross-sector communities (e.g. counselors, schools, mental health, community-based, higher education, philanthropy, and business) provide critical support services, but there is a need to expand infrastructure, “braid” financial resources, and deliver services more strategically and effectively to ensure that all youth are prepared for college and career upon graduating from high school. Findings include:

- The business community and educators could more effectively work together to provide a continuum of work based learning experiences at scale.
- Collaboration and coordination across community-based organizations is not widespread.
- Existing programs and policies are not fully leveraged, and availability of resources limits service delivery.

*“In many ways principals and administrators still see us in an outdated model of guidance counseling. The students have changed. Work has changed. School has changed. But people still see counseling as just guidance. It is so much more. It is a part of what I do, but it is not all that I do.”*

**-Counselor**

In sum, the landscape analysis is an important step forward in serving the twin goals of access and equity when it comes to opportunities for all Delaware youth to be prepared for postsecondary success. The project confirmed the stakeholder group’s belief that services are



not equally available to all youth who could use them, and vary in scale and quality. Use and knowledge of state-provided services (technology platforms, scholarships) is inconsistent across schools and organizations. In addition, there are substantially more services devoted to high performing students preparing for college. While this isn't a surprise, it's important to have evidence and data. Moving forward, the focus should center on the connection of career advisement linked to college access. This helps shift the conversation from college education being a terminal goal without connection to a career.

**Nearly a quarter of Delaware youth have experienced two or more adverse childhood experiences.**

- Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health, 2016

However, the landscape analysis also uncovered some issues that were less expected. For example, substantial evidence points to overworked school counselors, whose training and position descriptions are often misaligned with today's student needs. Today's youth bring a challenging array of mental and social health and other issues to school that require the collaboration of multiple individuals and

organizations to resolve. And, while many community-based organizations offer services, young people may have difficulty finding the right ones, or navigating the different in-school and out-of-school supports. Working without a common framework and strategy for collaborative messaging and distribution of services, community-based organizations and their partner schools may not be achieving the greatest impact for their work.

Finally, the landscape analysis suggests that college and career are often seen as two distinct postsecondary options, and that college and career preparation are separate from one another. However, college and career readiness supports are most effective when they recognize that college and careers are linked: **All** young people are headed for careers, and postsecondary degrees and credentials are prerequisites for an ever-growing number of jobs. All young people benefit from entering postsecondary education having explored a career of interest in high school.

**80%** of students surveyed *have developed* a student success plan.

Nearly **60%** *have not used it* in planning for their future or *do not find it helpful*.

The recommendations below identify paths for the state to continue to build on the foundational work already present in many communities and schools. The goal is to identify ways to strengthen and expand this existing work to eliminate barriers for every student and ensure systemic access regardless of zip code or school choice. The recommendations build from the report's research findings, and introduce new ideas from the national expert panel. In some cases the recommendations step out of the obvious solution—hire more school counselors—to put alternatives on the table.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### I. Rethink College and Career Advising

Policymakers, educators, community-based organizations, and employers should develop and implement a statewide student advising strategy that starts in elementary school, incorporates all relevant stakeholders, and employs technology creatively and effectively. The student advisement model should provide youth and their families with the career, college, and financial information they need for success after high school.

#### Key Action Steps:

1. Work across sectors to **develop a statewide student advising and educator training strategy** that better utilizes community and state-level services and expands the role of educators and administrators in building college and career preparation into curriculum and school culture.
2. **Assess the effectiveness of technology platforms being utilized by schools and community-based organizations**, and where appropriate expand access to better meet student needs (e.g. rural communities), and explore new approaches to fill gaps. Partners should develop a strategy for rolling out of technology and provide training to educators and service providers to ensure meaningful use during in-school and out-of-school activities.
3. **Offer parents and families information to increase their ability to advise students on career and college** (including academic readiness, career pathways, college applications and selection, and affordability) to be distributed through community-based organizations and schools.

### II. Address Student Mental Health Needs

Delaware's schools, community-based organizations, and government services should identify and provide social and emotional health programs at local schools and organizations and refer students to wraparound services to address students' stress levels and adverse childhood experiences that impact academic and life outcomes. A focus should be placed on the state's communities of concentrated poverty in both rural and urban settings.



#### Key Action Steps:

4. **Evaluate the landscape of social and emotional health programs, models, and available supports** for students to be used by school staff for referrals. Engage the research community and practitioners to utilize these data to address community challenges.

*“The kids are dealing with real adult issues at an early age. Like opioid addicted parents, taking care of siblings, or some type of abuse. The trauma is real. We just don’t have enough places to refer them to. There is a six-week wait. Anything can happen when you are in crisis...so six weeks...”*

**-Counselor**

5. **Use a competitive grant process to pilot and expand a range of mental health supports** identified in the landscape study tailored to the needs of students within individual schools and districts. Share best practices and successes statewide.
6. **State agencies and community-based organizations should systematize wraparound supports** (including transportation, health, and housing) **and identify opportunities to integrate and expand access to mental health providers** in communities through Medicaid eligibility policies, state funding, and private support.

### III. Expand Equity and Access to Support Services

State agencies, schools, and community-based organizations should intentionally engage in expanding the availability of high-quality academic, career preparation, postsecondary, and financial support services for every student, especially in the eight targeted promise communities. Equal effort should be placed on providing services in all parts of the state.

#### Key Action Steps:

7. **Create a data dashboard that reports college and career readiness, course enrollment, work-based learning, postsecondary enrollment and completion, college affordability, and employment**, including disaggregated student data for each indicator. Partners could set and publicize improvement goals and target resources to drive equitable distribution of student opportunities and drive educator professional development.

*“I have literally gone to the schools and spoken with principals and counselors. Many of my black kids have the grades and smarts, but they are not in any AP classes. So I go to the schools and contact parents to start asking the right questions.”*

**-Community-based leader**

8. **Expand high-quality summer and after-school programming**, with a focus on expanding to underserved student populations and locations, and expand services for topics on career exploration and experience, college fit, and college affordability. Regularly

reevaluate available services types, service distribution, and populations served to meet student needs.

9. **Work across sectors to conduct a comprehensive review of Delaware’s scholarship opportunities** (from SEED and Inspire to private scholarships) and develop a strategic plan to improve awareness and utilization and to strengthen success in attaining postsecondary education credentials.
10. **Provide training to educators, counselors, and community-based partners in cultural competency, implicit bias, and dismantling deficit mindsets.** This training would help shift approaches providers take by helping them recognize the role of system failures in student outcomes, learn racially and culturally inclusive teaching and counseling practices, and reevaluate their relative position and power within the social contexts in which they work and live.
11. **State and district leaders should pilot efforts to expand competency-based learning and increase access to college coursework (e.g. dual enrollment) and meaningful work-based learning, especially in 11th and 12th grades.** Leverage data systems and reporting to identify student eligibility and drive interventions for students who are off-track.

#### IV. Leveraging Existing Resources

Delaware should leverage existing programs, infrastructure, and funding sources provided by schools, community-based organizations, state agencies, and employers to strengthen existing college and career preparation services.

##### Key Action Steps:

12. **Establish intermediary organizations that work in conjunction with state agencies, employers, and higher education institutions,** to identify and communicate industry and employment needs and implement educational programs and work-based learning opportunities linked to good jobs.

*“The issue is not to have more meetings. We meet all the time. We need to have meetings that provide the structure for collaboration. True collaboration will not happen in the absence of intentional activity.”*

**-Community-based leader**

13. **“Braid” financial resources** (federal, state, county, city, private) **and integrate existing state infrastructure and systems** (like libraries, community college, and one-stop shops) to support college and career readiness goals and industry needs, and provide a more comprehensive and equitable set of resources and supports for students and their families.
14. **Establish a college and career preparation network** to promote collaboration and share tools and data among community-based organizations serving students and schools. Use this structure to develop common goals and outcomes for government, community, and business leaders.

## CONCLUSION

The State of Delaware has emerged as a national leader in college and career readiness. This is largely due to the possibilities for scale created by Delaware's size, strong state and local leadership, and the state's history of successful collaboration. However, the First State must also address the same challenges that loom large throughout the nation, including a shifting economy, concentrated poverty, issues of school equity and access, and communication within and across large organizations. As the Delaware continues to face budgetary challenges, collaboration and the authentic engagement of business and industry to support college and career readiness efforts will be increasingly necessary to prepare students for the new world of work.

The challenge to all—whether you're a business leader, policymaker, member of a community-based organization, educator, counselor, or parent—is to make the most of this opportunity. As you reflect on these findings and recommendations, think about how you fit in. Where can you contribute? Better yet, where can you take the lead? The future success of young people in Delaware and across the nation hinges on our collective action.