



One in a series for Helping All People Rebound and Advance

▶ Rapid Skill Building and Credential Attainment Strategies

Why it Matters

Workers who are Black, Latinx, in low-wage jobs, and without any college education have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they will likely have the hardest time finding good jobs once the threat of the pandemic has eased. These individuals, including those who are unemployed and underemployed, urgently need to get back to work.

Millions of the jobs that have been lost during the pandemic are not coming back because of automation. Additionally, as industries and businesses continue to evolve, employers are increasingly seeking new types of skills and postsecondary credentials. This means that people currently looking for work will need to reskill and upskill rapidly or risk being left further behind. High-quality short-term education and training programs can prepare individuals for rapid reemployment when structured thoughtfully. These programs are becoming increasingly popular, with the majority of Americans saying they prefer nondegree and skill training options over traditional college degree programs. To respond to this increase in demand, policymakers need to act quickly and expand these opportunities for individuals in need while ensuring that short-term training programs lead to jobs with

good wages and are aligned to college and career pathways opportunities so that participants are encouraged to continue their educations and progress in their careers.

Current Challenges

- Between July 2018 and June 2019, about 11 million out-of-work adults could have benefited from services under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) but **only about 226,000 participated in WIOA-funded training**. A lack of funding was partly to blame for the inadequate level of service, and the pandemic exacerbated the problem by triggering tens of millions of additional job cuts.
- Even though demand for short-term skill building programs is increasing, these programs **account for less than 10 percent of undergraduate enrollment** in United States.
- The country still **lacks a national standard, framework, or accrediting body** to assess and verify the quality of short-term training and certificate programs that aren't covered by federal financial aid plans, potentially leaving workers and learners at risk of enrolling in low-quality programs.

What's Needed

Rapid skill building and credential attainment strategies that are aligned to in-demand career paths—especially those involving skills that will prove to be most valuable in the post-COVID labor market, with a focus on individuals hardest hit by the current crisis and those most at risk of being left behind in a recovery.

What State Policymakers Can Do

Foundational Steps

- ▶ Prioritize state workforce development funds to support rapid reskilling and reemployment services. Ensure that services are culturally competent to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce and are targeted to those who need help navigating an uncertain labor market and who need in-demand skills training. This can include expanding state financial aid to cover the costs of in-demand short-term certificate programs, especially those linked to stackable credentials and career pathways, or providing parity funding for credit and noncredit postsecondary offerings.

Advanced Steps

- ▶ Adopt a statewide framework for rapid skill-building and short-term credential attainment that builds upon the state's Employment Training Provider List (ETPL) established under the WIOA to promote quality and guard against inequities by ensuring that training programs are aimed at in-demand or emerging career fields. The framework should include the creation of a publicly available statewide database of certifications that are vetted by regional workforce development boards. The database should include the average employment earnings of certificate holders and up-to-date information about industry skill needs.
- ▶ Reform state unemployment insurance (UI) programs and UI financing systems to focus on getting people back to work and into good jobs. This should involve efforts to better connect workers to workforce development services, including accelerated reskilling and career navigation supports. Reforms should also encourage innovations in the delivery of wage assistance benefits (e.g., wage insurance, work sharing, part-time UI).

Transformational Steps

- ▶ Launch a College Promise Program for individuals working in low-wage frontline jobs and in industries deemed to be part of the nation's critical infrastructure during the pandemic. The program should provide participants with debt-free access to short-term credentials, postsecondary degrees, and other high-quality skill development opportunities. It should also cover costs beyond tuition, such as transportation, housing, child care, and emergency expenses.

State Spotlights

Alabama

Alabama's Success Plus program is designed to improve the level of postsecondary educational attainment among state residents. As part of this initiative, the state identifies valuable credentials as those that 1) lead to wages that are at least 20 percent higher than those earned with a high school diploma alone, 2) are transferable to multiple employers and provide broad-based opportunities, 3) provide a base for ongoing education or training, 4) can be quantifiably tracked, 5) are awarded by industries, professional groups, or government agencies, and 6) respond to Alabama employer needs.



Michigan

Michigan has set up a scholarship program for frontline workers without college degrees who worked in essential industries during the state's COVID-19 shutdown in the spring of 2020. The scholarship program, called Futures for Frontliners, provides these workers with tuition-free access to community colleges so they can pursue an associate degree or a skills certificate, either full time or part time. Additionally, Michigan is working with Credential Engine to make credentials in the state more transparent and to help inform the state's approaches to education and workforce development.



North Carolina

North Carolina recognizes that noncredit courses are a valuable option for students. In 2019, the state legislature voted to fund noncredit and credit programs equally—making noncredit options all one price and more affordable. Pressure from employers and a rise in the popularity of short-term programs prompted the move.



State Policy Road Map for an Equitable Economic Recovery

This resource is a part of a series that provides state policy solutions focused on people, places, and systems – with the goal of closing equity gaps and driving economic advancement for all.

[Read Full Series](#) ▶

Featured JFF Resources

Redesigning Training Programs for the COVID-19 Era and Beyond.

Training and education will be key to helping displaced workers find stable jobs in the post-pandemic recovery, but programs need to benefit everyone equally.

[Read More Here](#) ▶

Closing the Credit-Noncredit Divide.

This report examines the structural divide between for-credit and noncredit postsecondary education programs and the problems it presents for people seeking better jobs.

[Read More Here](#) ▶

Accelerating Pathways to Careers for Adult Learners.

This brief offers examples of career pathways models funded by the TAACCCT grant program that were designed for adult students who require accelerated courses because they are often under pressure to enter or reenter the workforce quickly.

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