



Making College Work for Students and the Economy

A State Policy Roadmap

AT A GLANCE

The rapidly changing economy is raising the stakes on states to address the skilled workforce needs of employers and to expand economic opportunity to more people and places. To guide the policy actions of states, JFF designed a comprehensive policy agenda for increasing attainment of postsecondary credentials valued in the labor market and analyzed the extent to which our recommended policies have taken hold in a representative sample of states. Detailed in this report, JFF research finds that states have made progress in adopting several essential policy elements, but critical gaps remain that are undercutting talent development aims and contributing to persistent disparities in education and employment outcomes.

AUTHORS

David Altstadt

Associate Director

JFF

Ashley Bliss Lima

Senior Program Manager

JFF

Cynthia Liston

Principal

Liston Consulting LLC

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In undertaking this research, we endeavored to capture and document relevant information on policies in place through March 2019 and to independently verify their accuracy. However, unintentional errors and omissions are possible, due to the magnitude of this research project and the complexity involved in determining whether state policy information met our threshold for each policy recommendation.



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About the Authors

David Altstadt is an associate director at JFF. He directs JFF's Policy Leadership Trust, which draws on the experiences and insights of postsecondary practitioners to advance evidence-based policy reforms. He also works with JFF's Student Success Center Network, helping community colleges implement guided pathways.

Ashley Bliss Lima is a senior program manager at JFF. She provides policy and advocacy services and technical assistance to Student Success Center Network states, and supports JFF's practitioner-informed policy development through research, analysis, and strategic communications.

Cynthia Liston is principal of Liston Consulting LLC. As an education policy professional, she leads policy and strategy development, and conducts thoughtful policy research focused on increasing postsecondary access, success, and relevance.

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Introduction

In the rapidly changing economy, every state must take action to grow its talent pool in order to attract and fill the jobs of the future and expand opportunity to more people residing in cities, suburbs, and rural areas alike. Now that [nearly all new jobs](#) go to individuals with a college degree, it is essential that each state has a world-class system of public higher education capable of helping a vast array of people attain career skills and credentials with value in the labor market.

State policy plays a crucial role in realizing this vision. The right set of policies creates the conditions, incentives, and structures to enable postsecondary institutions and their partners to focus on skilled workforce needs and to help learners of all backgrounds reach their education and career goals.

To guide states in developing such policies, JFF designed a detailed, evidence-based, postsecondary policy agenda and analyzed the extent to which the recommended policies have taken hold in a representative sample of 15 states. The results show that states are making spotty progress.

Through our research, we identified three key findings that highlight critical gaps and areas for improvement, as well as achievements to build upon:

1. **States are data rich, but information poor.** Most data collection is not strategic enough to help states diagnose problems or design solutions.
2. **Expanding access is not enough.** State policy does not effectively address student persistence, college completion, or in-demand career connections.

3. Better align systems to maximize impact. Deeper collaboration between education, workforce, and human services is essential to help states meet talent goals and increase economic advancement for all.

States that we studied have made strides in important fundamentals, such as adopting policies that broaden access to college and establishing attainment goals and accountability systems. Yet significant gaps remain. States need to do more to foster a culture of data use and collective action around regional talent needs, bring proven student success practices to scale, and mitigate the financial hardships that limit educational and career opportunity for so many of today's students.

Unless states take bolder policy action, the widespread disparities in educational attainment and employment outcomes will persist. Employers will not gain the skilled workforce they need, regional economies will risk stagnation, and individuals will not fulfill their potential for economic advancement.

This report provides a road map for state leaders to tackle the tough work ahead and achieve lasting impact for learners, workers, employers, communities, and regional economies. The report:

- Makes the case for why JFF's postsecondary policy agenda can increase attainment of high-value credentials and help states build a better talent pipeline.
- Analyzes the extent to which these policies have been adopted so far in states across the country—documenting signs of progress, exemplary approaches, and critical gaps.
- Offers recommendations for policymakers to consider when pursuing further policy change.

JFF invites state policymakers, business leaders, postsecondary practitioners, and a wide variety of partners to use this road map when assessing their own state's policy conditions and in developing policy solutions to effect change.

About Our Policy Agenda

In January 2019, JFF issued a comprehensive policy agenda for addressing the skilled workforce needs of states called [*Smart Postsecondary Policies that Work for Students and the Economy*](#). It centers on the crucial role of two-year community and technical colleges in our country in serving as the nation's economic engine of opportunity. With low tuition, open enrollment, and strong connections to their communities, the nation's 1,000 public community and technical colleges are best positioned to develop the talent of millions of people at greatest risk of being left behind in the changing economy, including low-income individuals, first-generation college goers, people of color, immigrants, and working but underemployed adults (see *Figure 1*). Historically, higher education has underserved their need and desire for attaining skills and credentials valued in the labor market.

Our recommendations recognize that community colleges cannot solve this workforce imperative alone.

Our recommendations, however, recognize that community colleges cannot solve this workforce imperative alone. A key tenet of *Smart Postsecondary Policies* is that states will see better outcomes when they embrace a wider policy lens. This means working across systems that govern K-12, colleges and universities, workforce development, and other state agencies where, too often, policymaking happens independently of each other. This cross-cutting approach is especially important when it comes to successful transitions as students move through education and in and out of work.

FIGURE 1

The Economic Imperative for Smart Postsecondary Policies

4.6M low-income

young people ages 16-24 are out of school or not working

75M U.S. workers

don't have education beyond high school

Less than 12%

of low-wealth students who go to college graduate

30M adults

are without a high school diploma

25% of U.S. workers

live below the federal poverty line

52M people

make \$35,000 or less per year

43% decrease

in the share of national income held by middle-class households

Only 50% of people

born in 1985 earn more than their parents did, compared with more than 90% of those born in 1940

6.6M unemployed

Americans

1.5M discouraged

workers—people who would prefer to work but have given up looking

6.9M jobs

are unfilled

More than 11M

entry-level workers in the U.S. could be displaced by automation

Source: JFF compiled this information from multiple government and private sources.

Our policy plan is organized into three key strategies for making postsecondary education work for students and the economy:

- 1. Focus on the talent development needs of regional and state economies.**
- 2. Create efficient pathways to postsecondary credentials.**
- 3. Help all students fulfill their potential.**

Under each strategy is a series of policy recommendations. The scope of this agenda is intentionally comprehensive because improving outcomes requires an array of complex and interdependent policies. Moving small pieces of policy in isolation will not be sufficient to meet the challenges of our time. In conceiving the policy recommendations, JFF considered

evidence-based models and effective policy approaches undertaken by states we work with. We also took into account thought leadership about which policy interventions should be more ambitious as well as insights of postsecondary practitioners about designing policy that *helps*—rather than *hinders*—institutions in improving student success and addressing workforce needs.

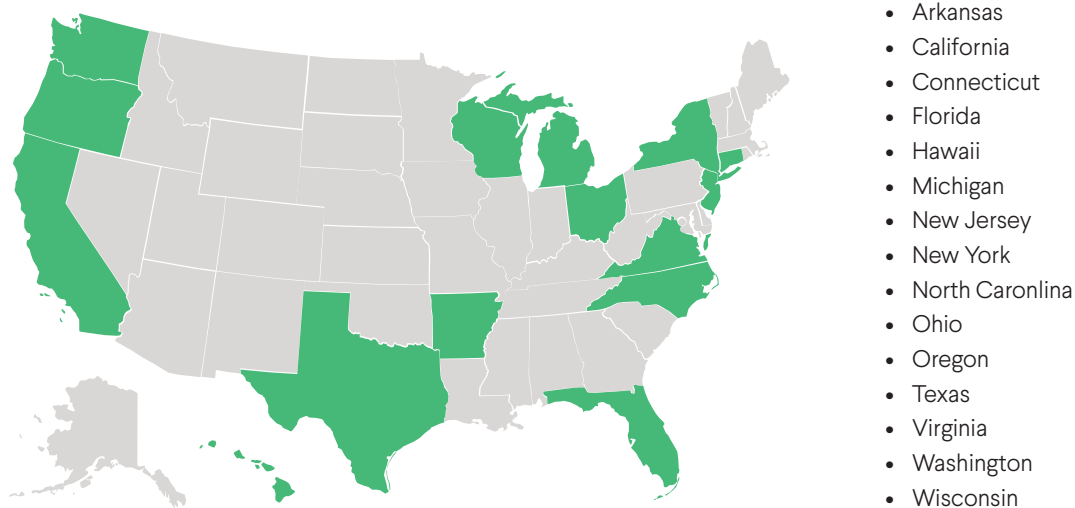
Based on JFF’s decades of experience collaborating with education leaders at the forefront of the college completion movement, we know there are no simple answers or one-size-fits-all approaches to making change through state policy.

About Our Policy Research

Over the course of fall 2018 through spring 2019, the JFF research team collected postsecondary policy information from 15 states: Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin (see *Figure 2*). We verified the information for accuracy and assessed whether the policies met our threshold for quality (see *Appendix for a discussion of our research methods*).

FIGURE 2

States Included in Policy Analysis



Source: JFF Research

JFF selected these 15 states because they contain community colleges and state-level community college organizations that are active participants in our longstanding [Postsecondary State Network](#), which facilitates learning and support around evidenced-based college completion reforms. In many respects, these states represent a cross-section of the nation. When compared nationally, they reflect a broad mix of blue, red, and purple states (as defined by political control of the governor’s office and state legislature). They include both large states (with a population of 10 million people or more) and smaller states (with a population of less than 10 million people). In addition, these states reflect national differences in how postsecondary institutions are governed, including states with stronger state- or system-level oversight of community colleges, and others where individual colleges have greater autonomy (see Figures 3-5).

FIGURE 3

Political Leadership of State Legislative and Executive Branches

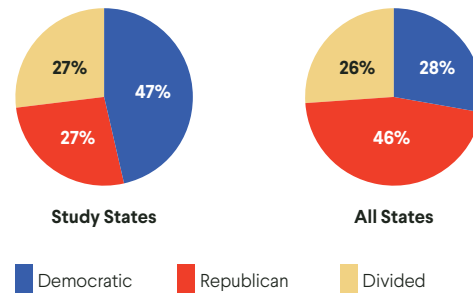


FIGURE 4

Size of States, by Population

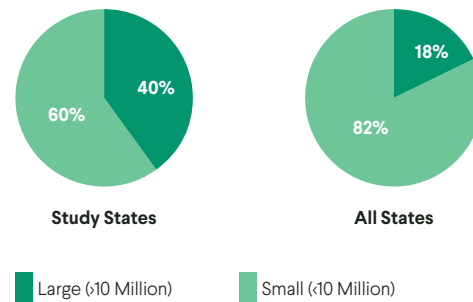
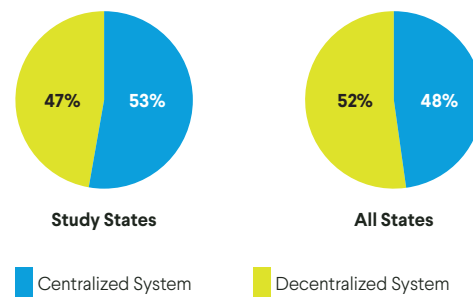


FIGURE 5

State Governance of Community Colleges



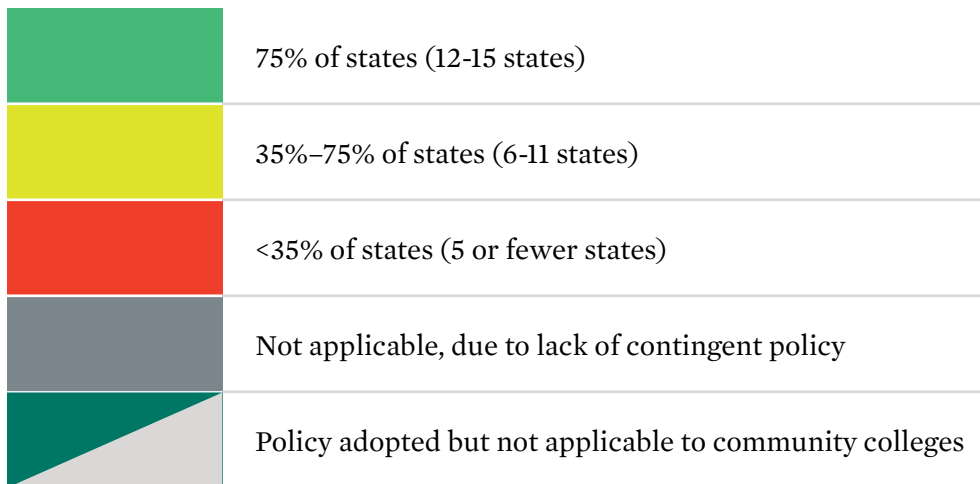
Source for Figures 3-5: JFF Research

We present the results of our policy analysis in the aggregate—looking at trends across the country. The number and percentage of the 15 states that have adopted each of the given policies is displayed in text and in color-coded charts. *(The key below explains the color coding.)*

To signal where optimal policy conditions are in place, we list specific states that are credited with adoption of all—or nearly all—elements of our recommendations as being “ahead of the curve.” We also describe an exemplary approach undertaken by one or two of the study states.

KEY

Share of Study States Credited with Adoption of Recommended Policy



Focus on Talent Development Needs of Regional and State Economies

To meet employer needs and put learners on a path to economic success, states need to provide the right information and incentives to drive talent development priorities. Policy recommendations 1–6 represent the building blocks for strong talent development systems.



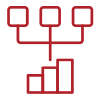
1. **Set a statewide goal for postsecondary attainment.** If set at an ambitious level and adopted with the buy-in of business and civic leaders, K-12 and postsecondary practitioners, and policymakers, an attainment goal can galvanize collective action and provide a major benchmark for success.



2. **Develop and maintain a longitudinal data system** for tracking student progress throughout their education and into the workforce. Access to rich yet digestible data on the student experience and transitions to careers is essential for creating a culture of inquiry and improvement among policymakers and practitioners.



3. **Make labor market outcomes available** in order to assess how well postsecondary programs affect employability and future earnings. Well-designed labor market information tools can highlight strengths and weaknesses in a state's postsecondary offerings, show gender or racial gaps in participation or earnings, and provide the basis for more productive discussions between institutions and business leaders.



4. **Expect colleges to use labor market information** to guide programmatic designs and course content. Requiring colleges to routinely use labor market information and employer input when making programmatic decisions would strengthen alignment between postsecondary programs and employer demand.



5. **Support regional alignment toward in-demand careers.** Fostering regional partnerships among education, business, industry, and workforce development providers creates greater coherence and economies of scale in tackling talent development needs.



6. **Expand high-quality work-based learning opportunities for students.** When designed well, work-based learning provides employers with a platform to prepare new sources of talent for work while informing and influencing program curricula. Students benefit by gaining exposure to industries and fields, while building marketable skills and accumulating credits toward credential completion.

In the following pages, JFF assesses the progress states are making in developing the recommended policies focused on talent development.



Postsecondary Attainment Goal

Setting a statewide goal for postsecondary credential attainment is an essential precondition for making postsecondary education work for students and the economy. Yet although it's a step in the right direction, an overarching goal, in and of itself, is not enough. It does not provide enough information or offer enough direction on how to reach the desired attainment rate, nor does it illuminate the kinds of postsecondary credentials that are of most value in the labor market.

States need to know more about what types of credentials students are earning in order to assess how well those credentials align to employers' skill needs and how well-suited they are for in-demand careers that pay family-supporting wages. In addition, states need to know who is more likely to attain credentials and who is less likely to do so. We call for states to collect and track data on attainment by types of credentials (e.g., degrees, certificates, and certifications) and categories of learners (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, gender, age cluster, prior college experience, and enrollment intensity, among other potential measures). Moreover, states should adopt and invest in strategies to close specific gaps in attainment among these populations and credential types.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, half of the five recommended attainment goal policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: The vast majority of the states have an attainment goal. More than half of them track attainment by particular types of credentials and have articulated strategies for increasing attainment among underserved populations.



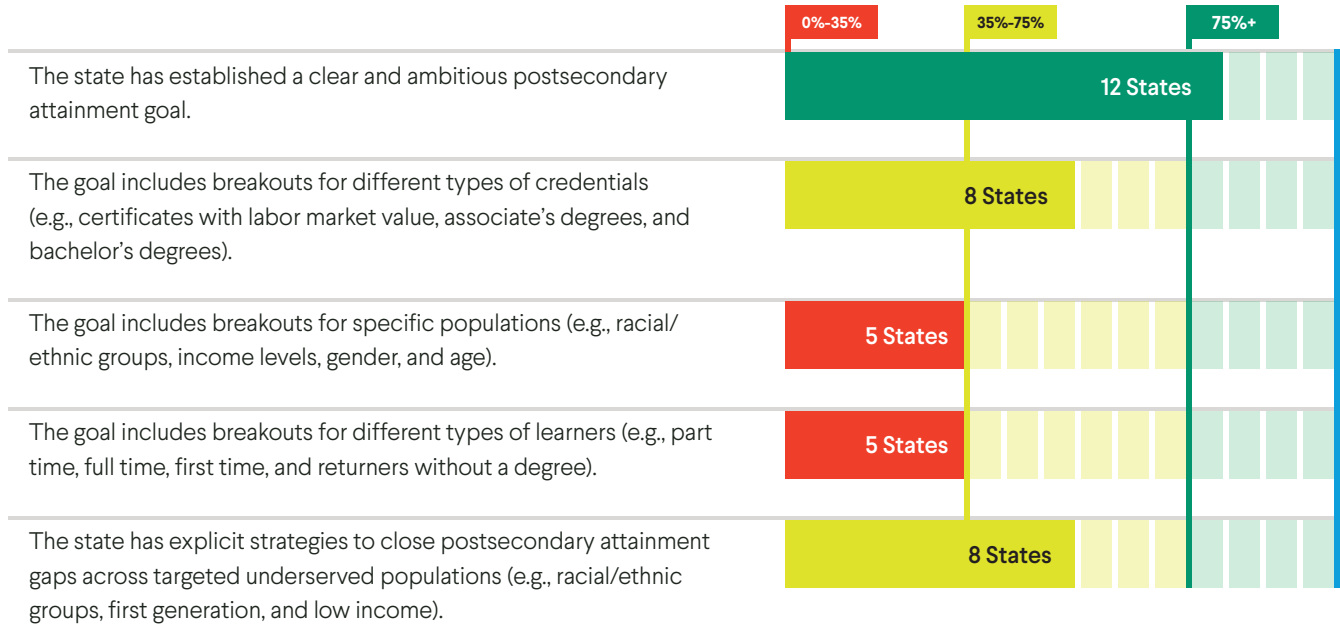
Critical gaps: Only one-third of the states are measuring progress by student demographics and learner types (e.g., part time, full time, first time, and returners without a degree).



Ahead of the curve: Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin.

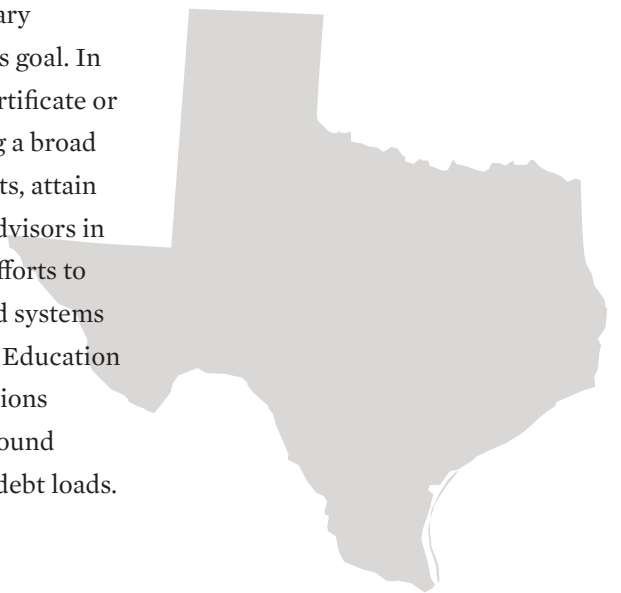
POLICY RECOMMENDATION 1: POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT GOAL

The state has a clear and ambitious postsecondary attainment goal that includes breakouts for historically underserved populations.



State Spotlight: **Texas**

While almost all of the states we studied have set a postsecondary attainment goal, Texas has gone further than most to achieve its goal. In aiming for at least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 to have a certificate or degree by 2030 (known as 60x30TX), the state is implementing a broad set of programs designed to help more students, including adults, attain a degree. State actions include supporting designated college advisors in high-need high schools, providing grants to support colleges' efforts to increase their completion rates, and retooling state financial aid systems so that they are more accurate and effective. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has established targets for specific populations and publishes a yearly [progress report](#) with detailed metrics around completion rates, acquisition of marketable skills, and student debt loads.





Longitudinal Data System

Connecting data systems and routinely analyzing data helps postsecondary institutions better understand where their students are coming from (whether from K-12 schools, the workforce, or other institutions) and how well prepared they are for their next step, whether that is employment or transfer to another educational program. The U.S. Department of Education supplied startup funds to states to create or expand longitudinal data systems; however, there's more work to be done to cement a culture of data inquiry and improvement.

Fundamentally, JFF calls on states to maintain a system for linking compatible data from K-12 school systems, community colleges, and universities to track student progress and outcomes. States should also feed labor market information into their data systems to support “apples to apples” comparisons of the way students with similar interests and academic experiences perform in the workforce. JFF also recommends that states disaggregate data by student demographics and learner types to uncover key differences. Importantly, states should turn the data into useful information and publicly release findings regularly, with the desired goal of informing policy and guiding the education and career decisions of students and their families. A routine flow of actionable information is critically important to understanding persistent gaps in access and completion and developing targeted strategies to close them.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, just over two-thirds of the five recommended longitudinal data policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: The vast majority of the states have a data system that makes it possible to track students from K-12 through higher education and to disaggregate data analysis by student characteristics.



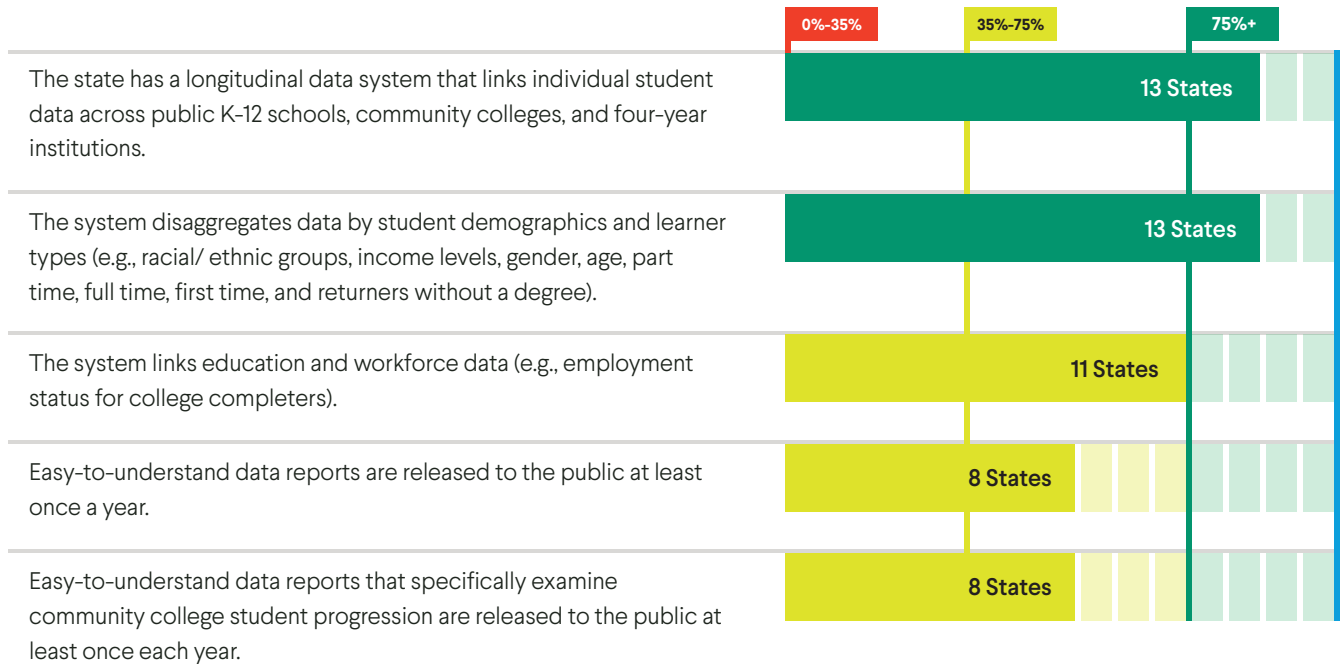
Critical gaps: Only about half of the states publicly release data analysis—including research on the experience of community college students—on a routine basis.



Ahead of the curve: Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Michigan, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

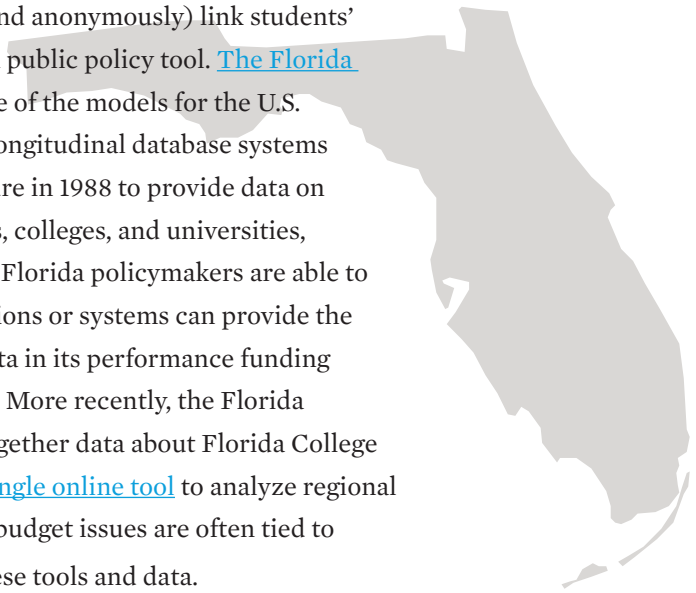
POLICY RECOMMENDATION 2: LONGITUDINAL DATA SYSTEM

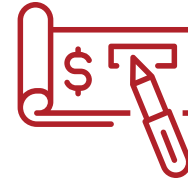
The state has a data system that enables policymakers to understand how students are progressing through public education and into the workforce.



State Spotlight: Florida

Florida was among the first states to systematically (and anonymously) link students’ education records to their labor market outcomes as a public policy tool. [The Florida Education and Training Information Program](#) was one of the models for the U.S. Department of Education’s first grants for statewide longitudinal database systems in 2009. FETPIP was established by the state legislature in 1988 to provide data on employment outcomes for graduates of public schools, colleges, and universities, which it continues to do today. Its long history means Florida policymakers are able to ask questions about graduates’ outcomes, and institutions or systems can provide the answers. The Florida College System uses FETPIP data in its performance funding formula and in its own graduate outcomes [dashboard](#). More recently, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity has brought together data about Florida College System completers and job vacancy projections in a [single online tool](#) to analyze regional workforce supply-and-demand issues. New policy or budget issues are often tied to specific workforce-demand issues identified using these tools and data.





Labor Market Outcomes

For policymakers, access to high-quality labor market outcome data can be a strong mechanism for accountability. Linking students' educational records with their employment and earnings histories reveals, on average, how various institutions and degree programs lead to occupations with higher or lower wages and rates of employment. Moreover, labor market information can help students understand how others fared in the job market after choosing one program or another. And it can form the basis for productive discussions between institutions and employers.

JFF recommends that states measure employment outcomes of college graduates for at least five years, ideally tracking whether students are employed in career fields related to their programs of study. This will reveal how well postsecondary experiences prepared students for immediate job entry, as well as for career advancement and higher earnings over time. Wage changes can be very small in some careers but quite significant in others. States also should track labor market outcomes by credential types and student demographics to uncover differences that deserve targeted interventions or heightened scrutiny by policymakers. Finally, states should invest in data tools that consumers, practitioners, and policymakers can use to identify living-wage jobs with critical labor shortages in specific regions.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, just over one-third of the five recommended labor market information policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: A majority of the states track the employment outcomes of students for at least five years following graduation, and release that information to the public. Many also disaggregate the data by program of study and credential type.

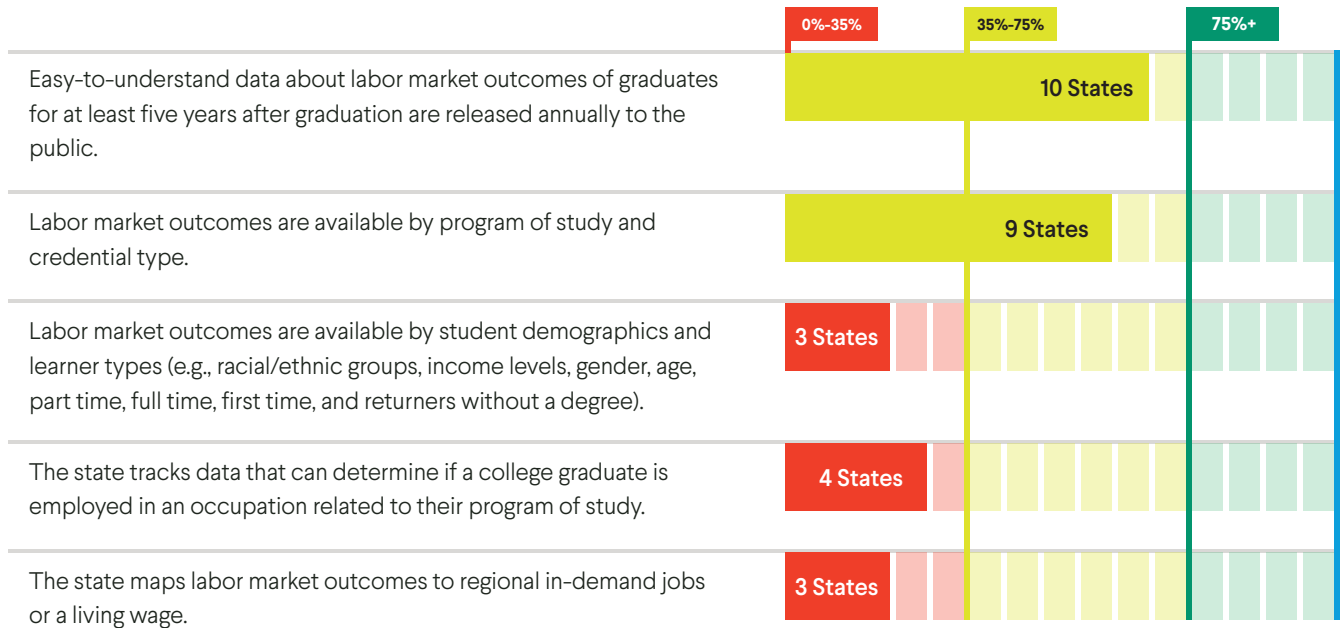


Critical gaps: Only about a quarter of the states disaggregate employment outcomes by student demographics and learner types. Likewise, few states are able to determine if students are employed in an occupation related to their program of study. Finally, few states map labor market outcomes to in-demand jobs or what equates to a living wage.



Ahead of the curve: California, Florida, and Wisconsin.

The state makes labor market information available to track and report employment outcomes of college graduates.

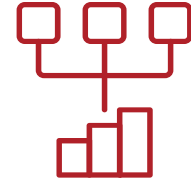


State Spotlight: Washington

Washington generates some of the most useful and comprehensive labor market reports and dashboards in the country. In 2007, the state formed the [Education and Research Data Center](#) to serve as a nonpartisan research body and custodian of cross-sector data independent from the agencies that contribute to it. ERDC has [produced reports](#) that look backward at students' earnings—not just forward—to calculate net gains in earnings, rather than just the absolute value. Through the ERDC's [employment dashboard](#), Washington has more comprehensive and longer-term data than most states.

With ERDC data, Washington policymakers can, for example, find out how much community college graduates working in the construction trades earn up to nine years after they complete their programs of study. They could also compare the wages of certificate holders with those of people who participated in apprenticeships or determine the likelihood that Seattle high school students will enter higher education rather than becoming involved in the criminal justice system. For anyone interested in the connections between education and involvement in the criminal justice system, the ERDC [incorporates statewide criminal justice data](#) into its assessments of outcomes.

Programmatic Alignment to Labor Market Demand



In today's economy, community colleges must be able to nimbly create, expand, or wind down programs based on regional labor market trends. To increase alignment between their programs and employers' changing demands for specific skills, community colleges should base their strategic decisions on traditional and real-time labor market information coupled with input from employers.

JFF recommends that states set clear expectations for colleges to use regional labor market information and employer input to align their programs to workforce needs. Policymakers should support the colleges' efforts in that regard by creating accountability measures and funding frameworks that recognize that efforts to respond to employer needs may take different forms in different regions of the state, and may differ depending on how high or low the unemployment rate is. We recommend that states require colleges to assess labor market demand before establishing both new degree programs and short-term credential programs. States should also require colleges to routinely review programs to ensure that they are still relevant. And finally, states should offer incentives that encourage colleges to develop or expand programs that meet critical workforce needs.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, three of the four recommended program alignment policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: All of the states require community colleges to use labor market information and seek employer input to assess the demand for and relevance of proposed new programs. A large majority of them also expect colleges to do the same when proposing short-term credential programs.

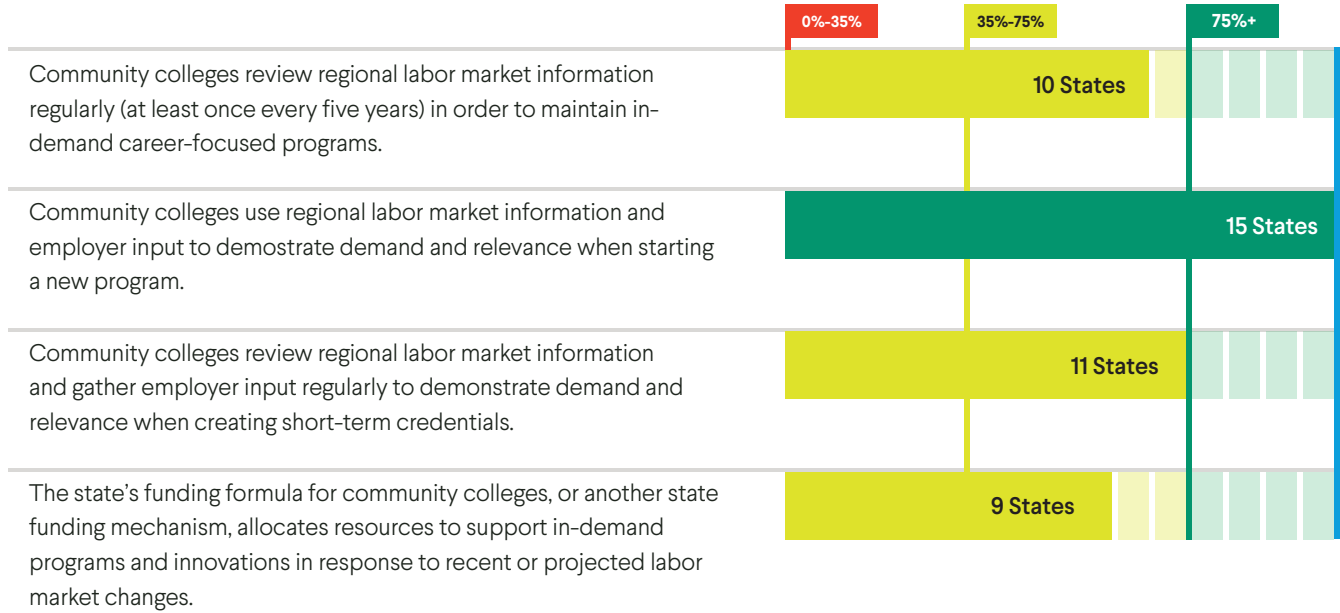


Critical gaps: It is not as common for states to expect community colleges to review labor market information regularly to maintain existing career-focused programs. Even fewer states dedicate resources specifically to support in-demand programs and innovations developed in response to labor market changes.



Ahead of the curve: Arkansas, California, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

The state sets expectations for community colleges to use regional labor market information and employer input to align their programs to workforce needs.



State Spotlight: Virginia

In its [Complete 2021](#) strategic plan, the Virginia Community College System committed to focusing on credentials closely aligned with regional workforce needs. To ensure that resources were available to support that goal, the legislature funded the [New Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program](#), which provided pay-for-performance funding for community colleges to create short-term programs aligned with high-demand fields, as determined by the Virginia Board for Workforce Development. Institutions receive funding tied to the number of students who complete the programs and go on to earn industry credentials. Students are also paid for performance—they only pay one-third of the cost of their program if they complete the training. Now rebranded as the [Fast Forward](#) program, with additional funding leveraged by the original Workforce Credential Grant, the initiative has resulted in Virginians attaining more than 16,000 in-demand credentials since it began. The legislature has responded positively, adding an additional \$4 million to the [biennial budget](#), bringing the Fiscal Year 2020 total to \$13.5 million.



Regional Alignment to Labor Market Demand

When education institutions and workforce development providers across the same region are able to “row in the same direction,” it is more likely that employers will have access to talent and that students and workers will know which careers to pursue for economic advancement. Creating incentives that encourage regional actors to collaborate with one another also can increase efficiencies by ensuring that programs reinforce and complement each other, rather than duplicate efforts or create gaps.

JFF recommends that states take an active role in fostering regional collaboration. State policies should encourage educational institutions and workforce development organizations to adopt unified messaging about which career fields are most in demand. If partners develop and promote their own separate messages regarding “hot jobs” or other labor market outlooks, students and their families will receive mixed signals while they’re trying to identify career paths. It’s especially important for low-income and first-generation college students to receive clear messages about labor market opportunities because they cannot afford to make any missteps as they choose their education and career pathways. Additionally, states should incubate and support sector-based talent development strategies, through which postsecondary and workforce development providers collaborate in addressing the specialized workforce needs of industries most critical to the health of their regional economies.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, half of the three recommended regional alignment policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: A majority of the states support industry-sector-based strategies for developing regional talent pipelines. Many states also are fostering regional collaboration among K-12, adult education, community and technical colleges, four-year institutions, and workforce development organizations to ensure that all parties align their programs and services toward in-demand careers.

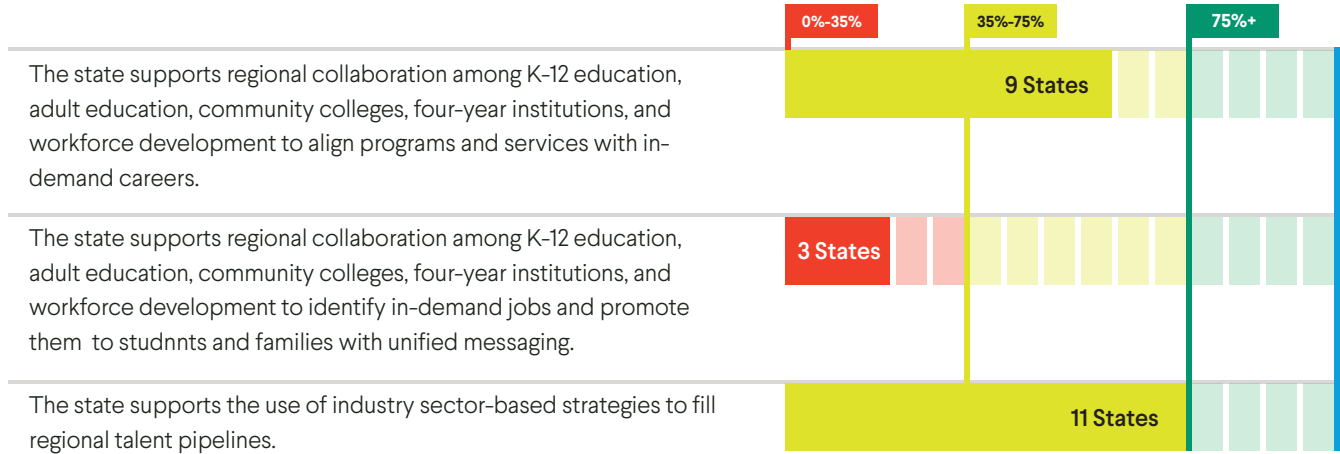


Critical gaps: Very few of the states have taken steps to encourage regional providers to take a unified approach to crafting and promoting messaging about in-demand careers.



Ahead of the curve: California, Hawaii, Michigan, New York, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin.

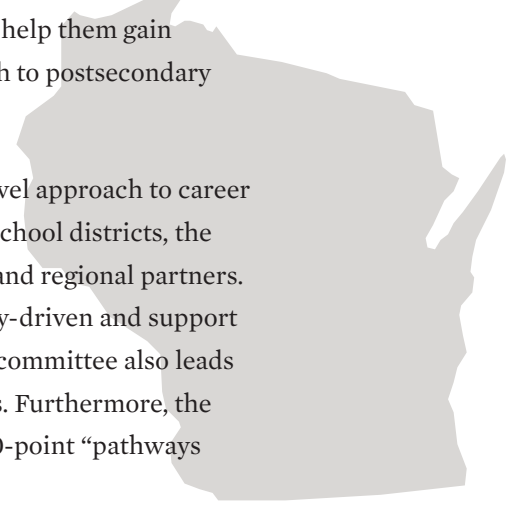
The state supports regional alignment among education and workforce development providers toward in-demand careers.



State Spotlight: **Wisconsin**

Wisconsin has a long history of supporting tight alignment between education and employer needs and is considered a national leader in deploying the career pathways model for addressing talent development and economic advancement aims. Career pathways equip students with industry-recognized credentials that help them gain footholds in high-demand occupations while also clarifying the path to postsecondary credentials and career advancement.

The Wisconsin Pathways Committee guides a systems- and state-level approach to career pathways by knitting together Wisconsin Technical Colleges, K-12 school districts, the workforce system, economic development entities, and other state and regional partners. The Pathways Committee ensures that career pathways are industry-driven and support students and jobseekers of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. The committee also leads the overall strategy and creates professional development resources. Furthermore, the state funds regional pathways coordinators and has established a 20-point “pathways scorecard” to guide and assess implementation.





Work-Based Learning

In an era in which [three out of every four students](#) are already working their way through college, internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships all present students with opportunities to earn income in their desired career fields, rather than toiling away in dead-end jobs that do not necessarily accommodate class schedules and school responsibilities. Employers that offer work-based learning opportunities also benefit because the trainees develop skills that make them good candidates for permanent jobs.

JFF recommends four key policy approaches for expanding access to high-quality work-based learning experiences. We believe a good place to start is by launching a statewide initiative to promote work-based learning opportunities, set quality standards, and match interested students and employers. States should also consider providing employers with tax incentives and wage subsidies for employing and training students. Moreover, as interest in apprenticeships grows, we call on states to partner with community colleges to expand opportunities for apprentices to earn college credit for on-the-job training and to develop apprenticeship programs in a wider array of fields, like manufacturing, health care, and IT. Finally, states should reimagine the work-study model by investing in approaches that connect aid-eligible students with career-oriented job placements on and off campus. Doing so would stretch state funding for financial aid further because employers would cover portions of students' financial aid packages by paying wages to students.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, just under half of the four recommended work-based learning policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: Two-thirds of states have statewide initiatives to increase work-based learning opportunities for postsecondary students. Nearly as many of the states have strengthened partnerships between Registered Apprenticeship programs and community colleges.

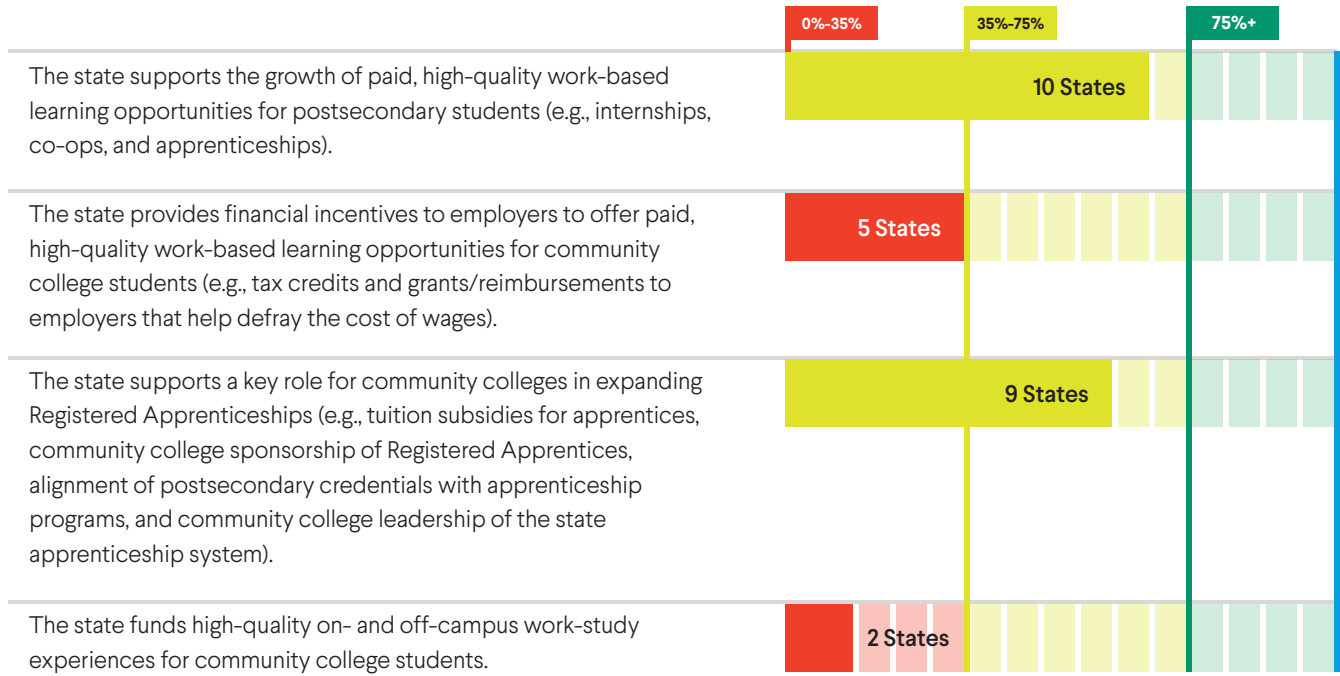


Critical gaps: Only one-third of the states provide financial incentives to encourage employers to offer paid, high-quality work-based learning opportunities for students. And even fewer states are funding high-quality on- and off-campus work-study experiences for students.



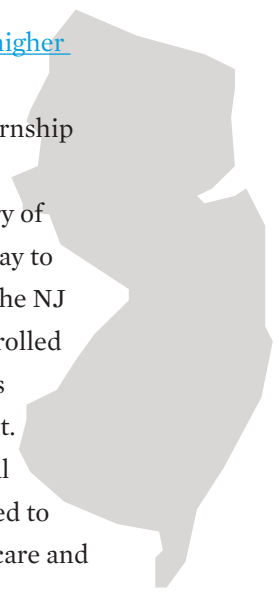
Ahead of the curve: New Jersey, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin.

The state supports work-based learning opportunities for postsecondary students as part of their program of study.



State Spotlight: **New Jersey**

New Jersey is promoting work-based learning as a pillar of its new [strategic plan for higher education](#), and is funding several initiatives to expand internship and apprenticeship placements. The state has committed \$1.5 million for its Many Paths, One Future Internship Grant program. A collaboration between the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the Department of Education, and the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, the program reimburses employers 50 percent of the wages they pay to new high school and college interns, up to \$1,500 per student. A similar effort called the NJ Career Accelerator Internship Program, which is specifically for first-time interns enrolled in STEM education programs and pursuing STEM-related internships, also reimburses employers 50 percent of an intern’s wages, but with a higher cap of \$3,000 per student. The state is also committed to expanding apprenticeship opportunities. With financial support from the federal government, New Jersey community colleges have committed to significantly scaling apprenticeships to serve more than 6,000 students in the health care and advanced manufacturing sectors.



Create Efficient Pathways to Postsecondary Credentials

To complement talent development aims, states need to set policies that create more efficient and seamless pathways for all learners to enter, persist in, and complete postsecondary programs of study.

Policy recommendations 7 through 11 represent proven approaches for accelerating attainment of postsecondary credentials that have value in the labor market.



- 1. Make dual enrollment a seamless pathway** to a college degree for more high school students in need. Improve the quality of college courses taken for dual credit, align those courses to degree requirements, and bolster the success rates of underrepresented and underserved student populations.



- 2. Accelerate entry into college-level courses** by redesigning and redefining approaches for addressing college readiness. Support implementation of evidence-based approaches for determining college readiness and efficiently resolving critical deficiencies.



- 3. Reduce the time it takes to complete a two-year degree.** Put structures and supports in place that help more students pick their career paths and accumulate the credits they need to finish programs on time.



- 4. Ensure that transfer students have a fair shot at a four-year degree.** Foster an environment of collaboration and accountability in helping community college students successfully transfer to four-year institutions and complete a bachelor's degree on time in their desired career fields.



- 5. Fund what works and what matters.** Equip community colleges with sufficient resources and appropriate incentives to scale evidence-based reforms for improving student success and talent development.

In the following pages, JFF assesses the progress states are making across these five policy recommendations for making pathways to credential attainment more efficient.



Dual Enrollment

A growing number of high school graduates are enrolling in college, but for far too many their high school graduation could be their last commencement ceremony. [More than half of students](#) who start college drop out within six years. Completion rates are even worse for first-generation students, who may have trouble covering costs and navigating college.

Taking college courses for dual credit [increases the likelihood](#) that high school students graduate, go to college, and attain a postsecondary credential. But the growth of dual enrollment programs in recent years will only deliver those benefits if they are designed carefully and include supports specifically for underserved students, who have the most to gain from early exposure to college. Moreover, without the right state policy framework in place, dual enrollment programs may not live up to academic standards of higher education, prove to be financially unsustainable for educational institutions, and reinforce equity gaps.

JFF recommends that states set standards to ensure that dual enrollment courses, no matter the setting, are equivalent to college courses in terms of curriculum, course materials, academic rigor, assessments, and instructor credentials. States also should ensure that dual credits count toward postsecondary programs of study.

States should work with practitioners to curate academic- and career-focused pathways that embed college courses in high school and ensure transfer of dual credits to postsecondary institutions in desired fields of study. We also call on states to make dual enrollment programs affordable and set funding standards that are fair for high schools, colleges, and taxpayers. Finally, states should provide extra incentives and supports to high schools and colleges in low-income areas to increase participation among underserved students.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, more than half of the five recommended dual enrollment policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: Close to all of the states have quality standards for dual enrollment. Two-thirds of them have set funding guidelines to ensure fair cost-sharing among parties involved. And more than half have policies supporting dual enrollment pathways and for making college courses for dual credit free for low-income students.

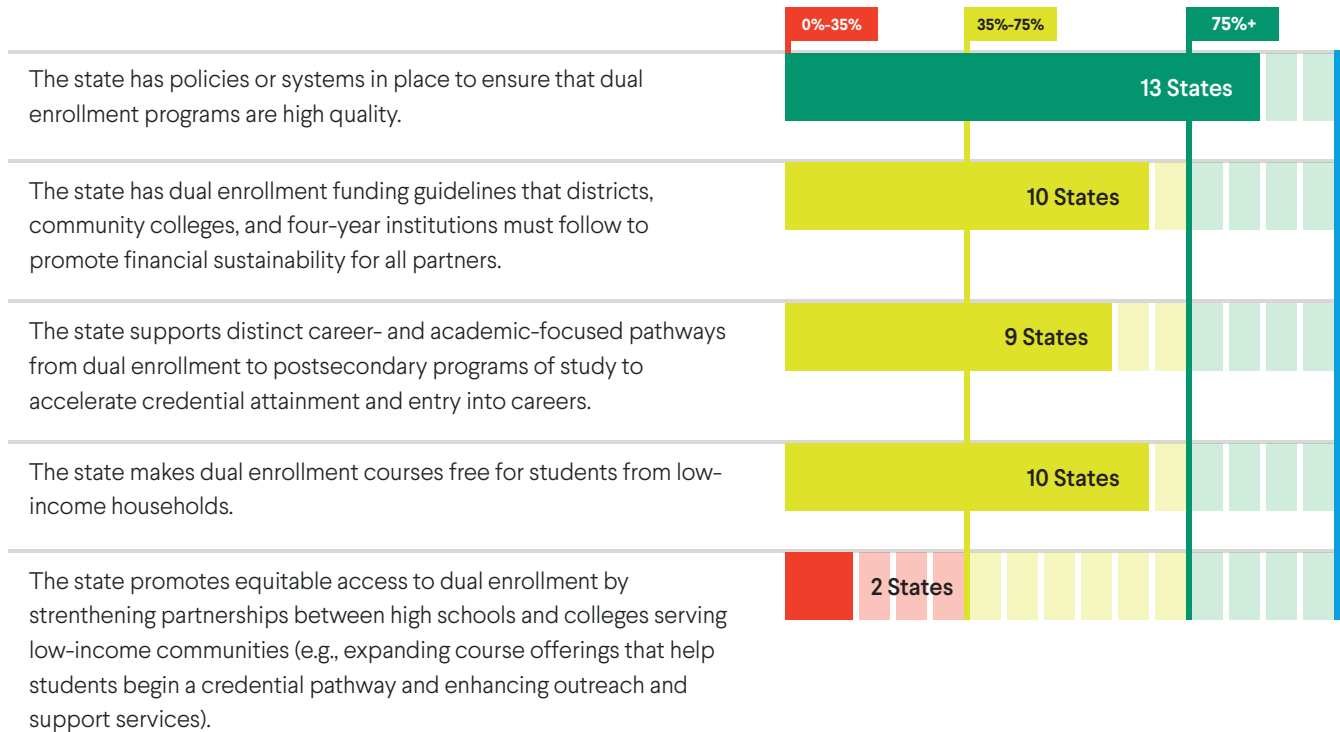


Critical gaps: Very few of the states have targeted strategies for expanding dual enrollment access in low-income communities.



Ahead of the curve: California, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

The state expands access to high-quality dual enrollment pathways designed to save students time and money in completing a postsecondary credential.



State Spotlight: Ohio

Hoping to avoid pitfalls around access, quality, funding, and pathways, Ohio has adopted a program called [College Credit Plus](#), which offers a comprehensive approach to supporting dual enrollment. The program gives youth, as early as in seventh grade, an opportunity to take college courses in “model pathways.” Credits earned in courses that are part of the Ohio Transfer Module are guaranteed to transfer to all of the state’s public colleges and universities. Ohio also has a default funding structure to ensure that dual enrollment works financially for colleges and school districts. For students and their families, the classes are free, as are textbooks and supplies.





College Readiness

Placing college students into traditional remedial courses [dramatically decreases](#) their chances of completing college-level courses and attaining postsecondary credentials valued in the labor market. Fortunately, there is mounting evidence that supports the use of alternative methods to assess whether students are ready for college and to remediate gaps in academic skills, thereby reducing the need for developmental education

JFF calls on states to change the way students are deemed college ready, reconsider what math classes are required for graduation, and redesign the ways in which colleges address students' academic needs. States should encourage colleges to use multiple measures to assess college readiness. For example, instead of relying solely on scores on high-stakes tests, colleges could evaluate students' high school coursework, grades, and grade point averages. Assessments that take a range of factors into account have been shown to reduce unnecessary placements into remedial courses. Moreover, states should encourage community colleges and universities to set different math requirements for STEM and non-STEM programs of study, so students who won't need calculus in their careers won't have to face the hurdle of completing default algebra prerequisites, when taking statistics or quantitative reasoning may be more suitable. In addition, states should support implementation of high school English and math transition courses that, upon successful completion, enable students to begin college-level work. States also should push for wider use of co-requisite and integrated education and training models, which can decrease the time it takes to remediate students' academic shortcomings.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, two-thirds of the five recommended college-readiness policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: All of the states have at least two of the five recommended college-readiness approaches in place. A large majority of them have expanded the use of multiple measures of assessment, co-requisite remediation, and differentiated math pathways.

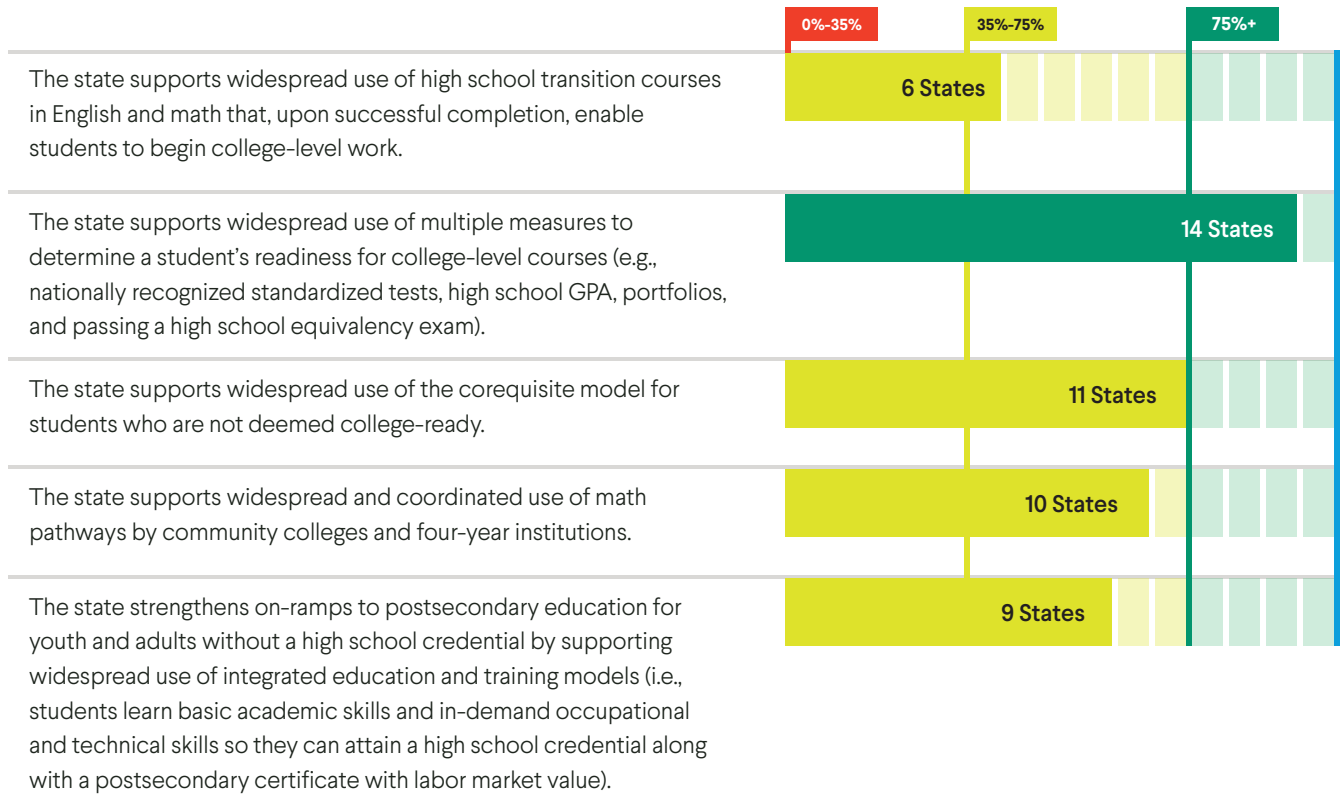


Critical gaps: Fewer states have policies designed to strengthen college readiness and college connections for high school students and adults lacking basic skills via the use of high school transition courses and integrated education and training programs, respectively.



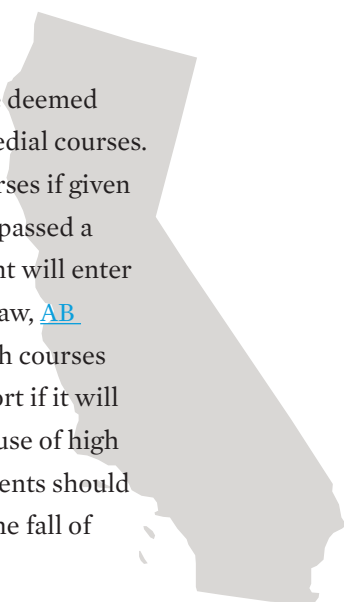
Ahead of the curve: Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

The state supports college readiness approaches that accelerate entry into college-level courses as quickly as appropriate.



State Spotlight: California

Two years ago, more than 75 percent of California’s incoming college students were deemed underprepared for postsecondary education, and many had to begin college in remedial courses. Embracing evidence that shows more students would succeed in transfer-level courses if given the opportunity, and that assessment tests tend to under-place students, California passed a law that requires community colleges to maximize the probability that every student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and math within one year. The law, [AB 705](#), prohibits colleges from requiring students to enroll in remedial English or math courses and authorizes colleges to require students to enroll in additional concurrent support if it will increase their likelihood of passing transfer-level courses. The state also mandates use of high school coursework, grades, and/or grade point averages to determine whether students should be placed in these courses. All community colleges had to comply with AB 705 by the fall of 2019.





Pathways to Two-Year Degrees

Far too many students rack up extraneous credits, wasting precious time and money and weakening their likelihood of completing college and advancing in their careers. A [growing body of evidence](#) reveals effective ways to restructure community college to make the pathway to degree completion more efficient, affordable, and seamless. States should adopt policies that support and encourage implementation of these pathway reforms.

We call on states to flex their oversight muscle by tracking and publicly reporting the time it takes to earn a degree. That will raise awareness and create a sense of urgency around the issue of students earning excess credits and spending more time and other resources on their educations than necessary. Additionally, states should support community colleges' efforts to implement proven approaches to reducing time to completion. For example, states should develop structures or guidelines for authenticating the prior learning experiences of incoming students and award them academic credits for those experiences. Moreover, states should ensure that community colleges clearly map out degree requirements so that students and their advisers know which courses they should take to earn desirable credentials and stay on track for on-time completion. Finally, states should ensure that colleges more routinely embed short-term certificates into their programs of study. That will give students incentives to earn certificates with immediate value in the labor market while also pursuing longer-term educational goals.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, half of the four recommended two-year pathways policies have been adopted per state.



Critical gaps: Less than half of the states have policy guidelines for awarding credit for prior learning.

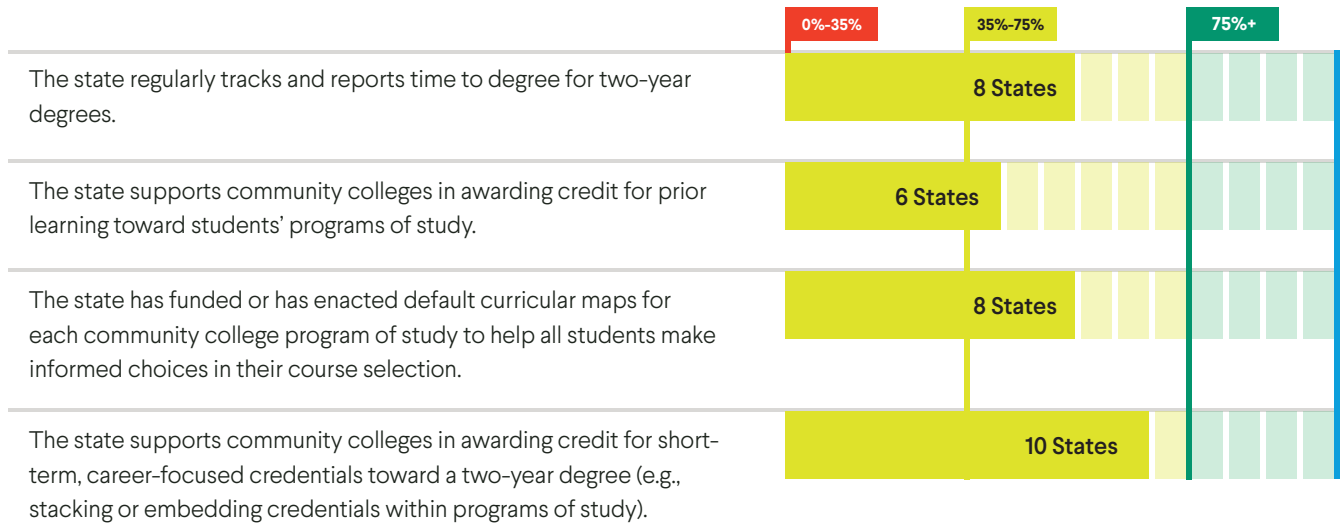


Signs of progress: Two-thirds of the states have taken policy action to support the articulation of short-term credentials as credit toward degree programs. More than half of them report the time it takes to earn a degree and support community colleges' efforts to develop default curricular maps.



Ahead of the curve: California, Hawaii, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The state supports efficient pathways toward the attainment of a two-year degree.



State Spotlight: **Hawaii**

As is the case in most other states, too few community college students in Hawaii earn a postsecondary credential in a timely fashion. To address the problem, state officials are taking a systemic approach to helping students efficiently complete two-year degrees. For example, the state’s innovative STAR GPS system provides all students with recommendations for the courses they should take each semester for a timely graduation. It’s an online advising and registration tool that can be used by all students at public two- and four-year schools. Moreover, an initiative called the [College-Credit Equivalency Program](#) enables students to receive credit for courses they completed before enrolling in college—whether they took those classes in high school, an adult education program, a technical school, or the military. Meanwhile, Hawaii requires short-term “concentrations” to be embedded within two-year degrees, and the state tracks and reports how long it takes students to earn their two-year degrees—and even breaks down those statistics by subgroups.





Pathways to Four-Year Degrees

A bachelor's degree is a key goal for many students and is necessary for certain careers. Yet the process of transferring from a community college to a four-year university is often riddled with impediments. The U.S. Government Accountability Office estimates that community college students [lose an average of 40 percent of their credits](#) when they transfer to four-year institutions.

JFF recommends that states define a common set of general education courses that articulate as credit toward bachelor's degrees. In addition, states should encourage community colleges and universities to create and publicize “transfer pathways” that stipulate the courses that should be completed in the first two years of specific fields of study so that community college students know what classes they should take to be on track for bachelor's degrees. And when educators establish transfer pathways, they should reach a consensus on which mathematics classes are most appropriate for given disciplines—and specifically determine whether the default algebra-to-calculus track is necessary (as we noted in policy recommendation number eight on college readiness). Finally, states should require universities to treat transfer students the same as non-transfer students when it comes to registering for courses and qualifying for scholarships and financial aid. States should also track and report transfer metrics for which both universities and community college are accountable, such as transfer rates and degree completion rates.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, half of the four recommended four-year pathways policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: All of the states have adopted a general education core curriculum. More than three-quarters of them have facilitated the development of transfer pathways from two- to four-year schools.

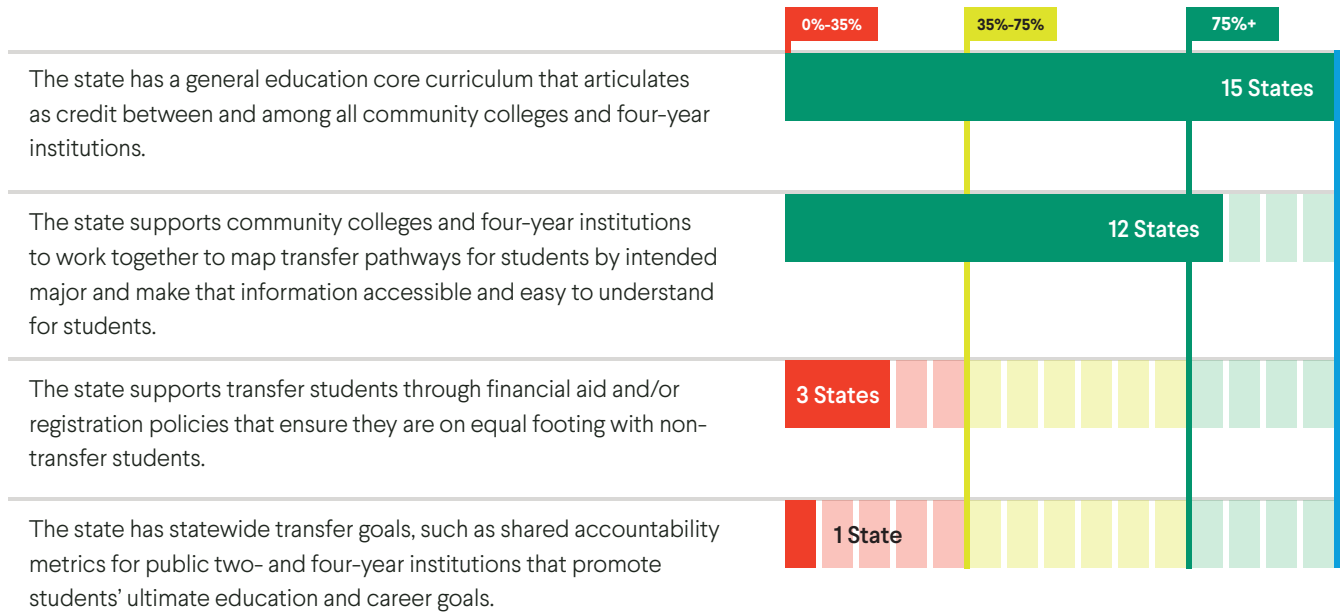


Critical gaps: Very few states have adopted safeguards to ensure equal treatment of transfer students or established shared accountability among two- and four-year institutions.



Ahead of the curve: Hawaii and Connecticut.

The state supports efficient pathways to a four-year degree from community colleges.



State Spotlights: Connecticut and Michigan

To smooth community college students' pathways to four-year degrees, Connecticut and Michigan are both developing statewide articulation agreements that go beyond general education and span entire degree programs.

The Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system has created 26 pathways, or "[Transfer Tickets](#)," that allow community college students to transfer upon completion of an associate's degree to four-year state universities without losing credits, and enter as juniors in their desired majors. An online tool called the Transfer Navigator provides program maps that align student coursework with the requirements of four-year degrees in programs ranging from biology to criminology.

Building off of its Michigan Transfer Agreement, which allows community college students to transfer 30 credit hours of general education credits, Michigan has launched a program called [MiTransfer Pathways](#) to fully articulate pathways by major from two- to four-year degrees. Michigan does not have a state higher education system, so membership associations for community colleges and four-year institutions (public and private) are leading the process. To aid their efforts, the state government approved a one-time appropriation to create an online portal that helps transfer students navigate between institutions.



Strategic Finance

States should treat community colleges as the foundation of their talent development system and invest in them accordingly. In fact, community colleges should receive more public resources than four-year institutions because their mission demands that they keep tuition affordable but, in many states, they make do with a [fraction of the revenue](#) that flagship universities collect. As a result, community colleges are limited in the types of instructional and support programs they can offer, and low-income and underserved students get less indirect support from the state than their peers at other institutions.

States should fund community colleges adequately and create incentives to expand their student success and talent development missions. Specifically, they should do the following: Make state and local community college appropriations proportionate with those of four-year institutions, award grants to seed implementation and expansion of programmatic strategies, create tax incentives to stimulate charitable giving to community colleges, and design outcomes-based funding schemes that reward colleges for strong performances, particularly in boosting outcomes for underserved populations.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, one out of the four recommended strategic finance policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: Half of the states provide seed funding to community colleges in support of implementing student success reforms. Twelve of the states have outcomes-based funding schemes, and half of those allocate sizable incentives for strong performance and specifically offer rewards for strong performances by underrepresented and low-income students.

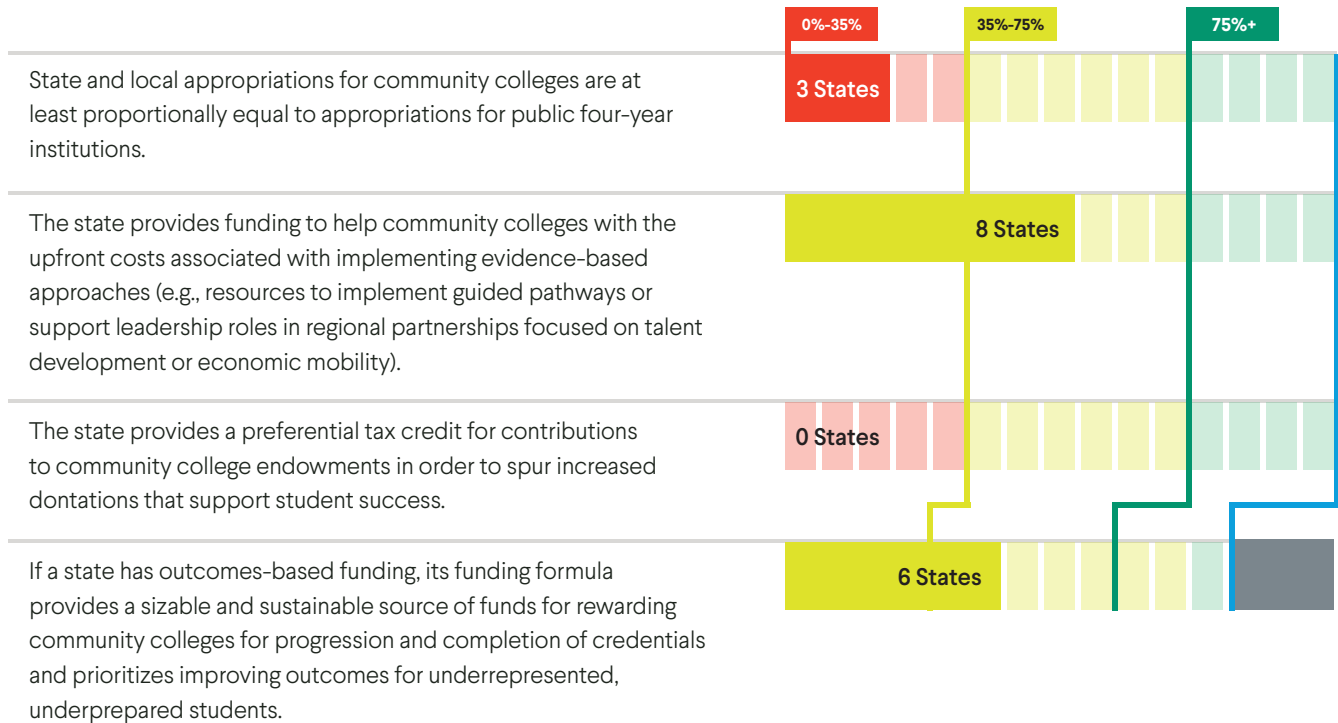


Critical gaps: Very few states distribute funding proportionately to two- and four-year institutions. No states have created tax incentives to encourage donations to community colleges.



Ahead of the curve: Wisconsin.

The state has community college finance policies designed to ensure funding is sufficient and aligned to support broader state education goals.



State Spotlight: **New York**

The State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) systems have both allocated funding to support their goals for student success.

New York has a fund specifically to support SUNY institutions’ [“Performance Improvement Plans,”](#) which are focused on expanding student access to programs and increasing completion and retention rates. The goal was to scale adoption of effective practices to serve more students across SUNY community colleges and universities. The SUNY system was able to award \$100 million for student success projects, including single-campus initiatives, such as grants to expand schools’ [Educational Opportunity Programs,](#) and joint projects, such as regional transfer pathways efforts. Money from the fund was also used to support [systemwide implementation of Carnegie Math Pathways](#) and efforts to create guided pathways at 10 colleges.

In the CUNY system, the biggest investment in student success at community colleges has been the Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP). After an [evaluation by research organization MDRC](#) showed that ASAP could nearly double graduation rates, CUNY sought and received funding from New York City to implement the program at scale. In fiscal year 2019, it had a [budget of \\$86 million for 25,000 students,](#) with plans to [expand to 50,000 students](#) by including adults with some college alongside traditional-age students. CUNY leads the way in aligning its major budget priorities with evidence-based best practices.

Help All Students Fulfill Their Potential

It is not enough to set talent development priorities and to make pathways clearer and more efficient if learners still encounter insurmountable barriers to credential attainment. This holds especially true if those learners are low-income and first-generation college students. Policy recommendations 12 through 15 provide tangible ways that state policy can help all learners navigate their education and career choices, pay for college, and address life's challenges as they endeavor to earn a credential. Without these policies, higher education will continue to reinforce, as opposed to reduce, equity gaps.



12. Enhance college and career advising so that more learners can make well-informed decisions and have the support they need to persist to completion. Expand the capacity of colleges and high schools, and target interventions to populations at greatest risk of being left behind.



13. Focus on the true cost of college and the financial needs of students. Measure the full cost of attendance and unmet needs for various populations and locales in order to target investments and interventions appropriately.



14. Reimagine state financial aid to address the challenges faced by today's students and the realities of the changing economy. Adjust state financial aid policies so that postsecondary credentials are within reach for more learners and workers who need them.



15. Mitigate the economic insecurities of students so they

can focus on their studies. Make use of the services and resources available through social welfare policies and programs to help students overcome crises and stay in school to acquire the skills and credentials they need for work.

In the following pages, JFF assesses the progress states are making across these final four policy recommendations for helping all students fulfill their potential and contribute to the economic vitality of their communities.



College and Career Advising

All students benefit from help in making the transition to college, persevering through challenges, and navigating a multitude of decisions toward credential attainment. However, high school and community college advising programs are stretched thin. Without access to robust college and career advising services, students may not get the information they need to choose colleges or classes, understand how to pay for postsecondary education, and know where to turn for support. For employers looking for skilled workers, shortcomings in advising programs can cause talent pipelines to dry up because students may never learn about in-demand careers that pay family-supporting wages.

JFF calls on states to hire more college and career advisors, deploy new technology tools, and recruit and manage volunteer mentors for students. States should also consider new approaches to postsecondary funding, because current models are typically based on instructional costs and do not include earmarks for student services such as advising. In addition, states should back efforts to engage people who need special support to enter and complete college, including foster care youth, justice-involved individuals, and adults who have attended college but haven't earned a degree.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, more than half of the four recommended college and career advising policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: More than half of the states have augmented the capacity of high schools to deliver college and career advising. A majority of them also have adopted policy measures to alleviate barriers to college for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations.

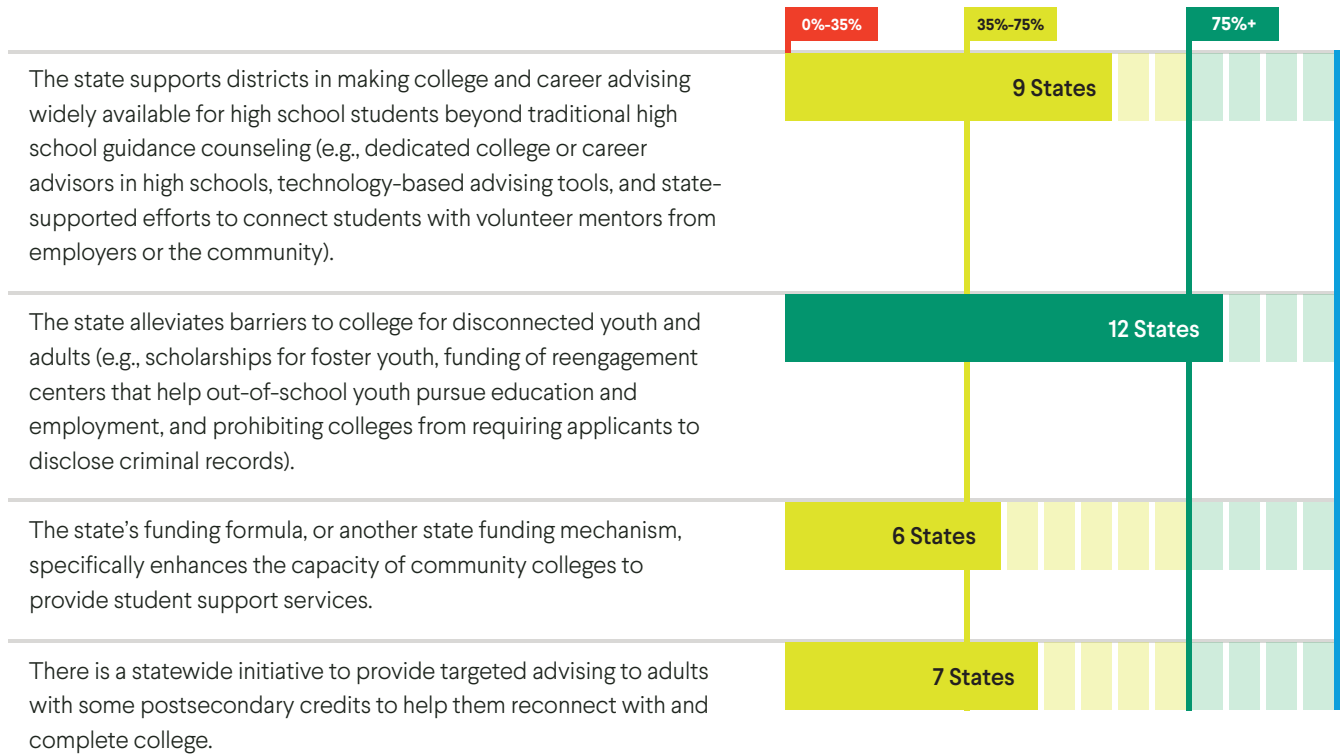


Critical gaps: Fewer than half of the states have augmented the capacity of community colleges to deliver college and career advising services. Less than half have statewide initiatives to encourage adults to return to college and complete a degree.



Ahead of the curve: California, Hawaii, North Carolina, New York, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The state supports college and career advising to help students and families make well-informed educational choices.



State Spotlight: **North Carolina**

In 2015, the North Carolina legislature began funding [career coaches](#) to help high school students identify college paths. The coaches are community college employees who work full time in one or more high schools, complementing the work of traditional guidance counselors. In the 2018-19 academic year, there were 65 career coaches across the state. North Carolina is also using money from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Education and Training program to fund education navigators in 13 community colleges. The education navigators offer assistance to students who participate in food and nutrition support programs to help them achieve their education goals. In addition, 10 North Carolina community colleges are involved in an effort to implement and study the effectiveness of a program called [Carolina Works](#), a federal-grant-supported initiative in which “success coaches” use a holistic approach to advising. Finally, North Carolina community colleges are partnering with the University of North Carolina system to create a unified online portal called Adult Promise that offers tailored college advising and financial aid information for returning adult students and adults who are new to postsecondary education.



College Affordability

The cost of attending college has [risen significantly faster](#) than the rate of inflation in recent decades. Many factors contribute to that trend, including reductions in state investments in higher education. The end result is that many people who are contemplating postsecondary education must choose to either forgo college or join the ranks of the [45 million Americans](#) with student loan debt. Since most jobs today require a postsecondary credential, college affordability also affects employers. If recent high school graduates or adults who want to pursue new career opportunities cannot afford college, they will not attain the skills they and their prospective employers need.

To effectively address college affordability, states must understand the issue. States often focus only on tuition and assume that rising rates affect all families equally. They must recognize that college affordability is not a monolithic issue, and they should track data that paints a complete picture of the types of students likely to find college unaffordable. By capturing detailed information about college affordability for people of different income levels, and by tracking financial aid needs that go unmet, states can create a foundation of information that can inform policy solutions that support students of all types. States should also provide more need-based financial aid than merit-based aid to steer resources toward students who have the greatest need rather than subsidizing those who may be better able to afford college. Finally, state college promise programs should cover some expenses beyond tuition and fees for community college students.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, half of the four recommended college affordability policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: The vast majority of the states award more need-based financial aid than merit-based aid. Eight states in the scan have college promise scholarships, and half of them cover some college-related expenses beyond tuition and fees.

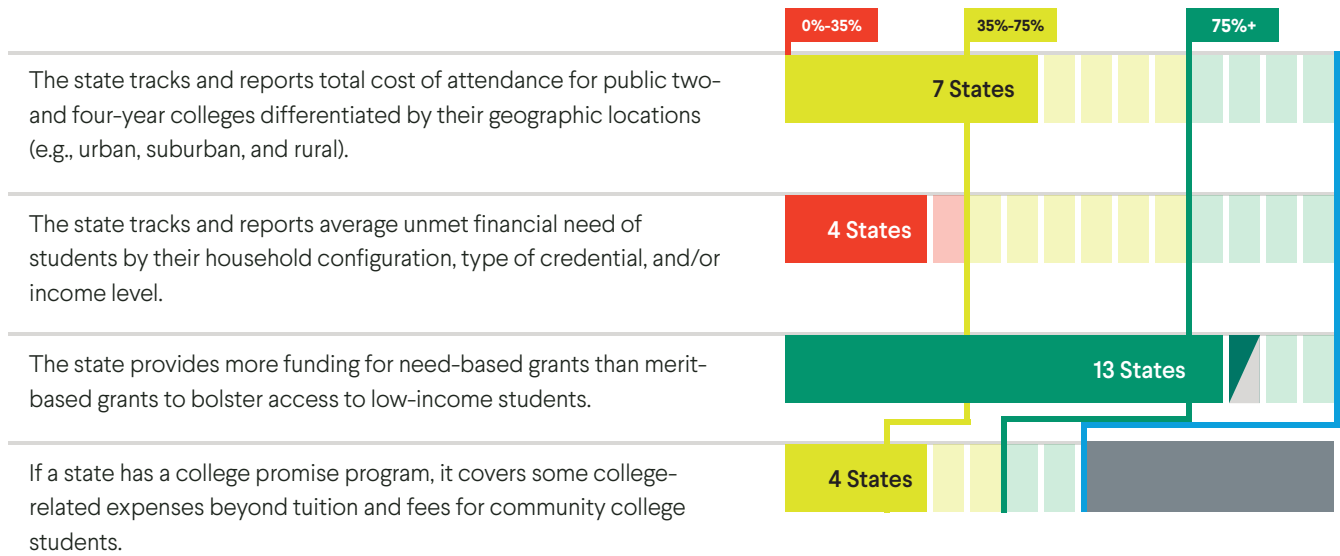


Critical gaps: Not many states are carefully examining the costs that students incur in going to college. Less than half of them report differentiated costs of attendance, while only a quarter of them report differentiated unmet needs.



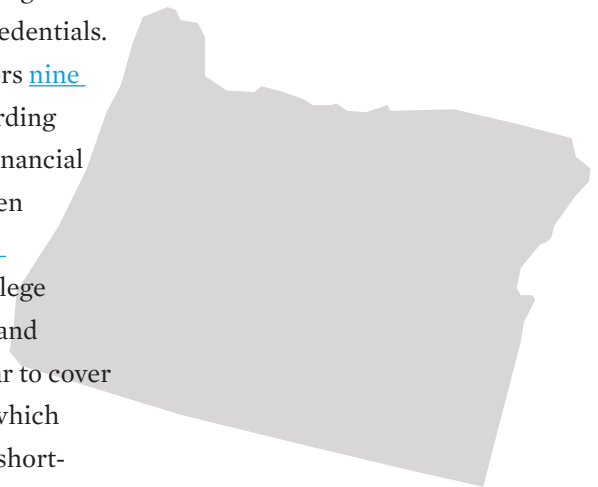
Ahead of the curve: Hawaii, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.

The state promotes college affordability.



State Spotlight: Oregon

Oregon is making an effort to understand and respond to the college affordability challenge for people in pursuit of postsecondary credentials. The state’s Higher Education Coordinating Commission monitors [nine key affordability metrics](#), including the net price of college according to family income and the number of students who have unmet financial aid needs. State officials analyze the data to identify links between affordability and completion and inform policy decisions. [Policy initiatives](#) focused on college affordability include the state’s college promise program, which makes community college tuition free and provides Pell-eligible students with an additional \$1,000 per year to cover basic living expenses; the Oregon Opportunity Grant program, which provides financial aid to part-time students and can be used for short-term credentials; and the Open Oregon Educational Resources initiative, which is designed to reduce textbook costs for students.





State Financial Aid

It is an important time to look “under the hood” at state financial aid programs to ensure that they help all types of students and promote college completion through equitable and inclusive financial aid allocation and distribution. State financial aid programs keep the door to higher education open for many, often supplementing federal financial aid, which has lost its “[buying power](#)” in recent decades as Pell Grant values have failed to rise along with the cost of attending college. State aid also broadens the pool of financial aid recipients, filling in the gaps where federal financial aid does not apply.

JFF recommends that state financial aid programs support part-time students, not just full-time students. That is important for people who need to balance work and college. State aid should also support students participating in short-term credential programs of one year or less that align to industry demand. Many short-term credential programs are not eligible for federal financial aid, but the skills learners acquire in such programs are often important to employers and lead to high-wage jobs. Additionally, state aid should support adults who are working to attain a high school equivalency certificate while also pursuing a postsecondary credential—an approach proven to accelerate the progress adults make toward occupations that pay family-supporting wages. Finally, states should offer financial aid that gives students incentives to complete their programs of study. There is emerging evidence that this type of aid—sometimes in the form of what are called “last mile” grants—encourages students to complete programs when they have exhausted their federal financial aid and are at risk of dropping out.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, more than half of the four recommended financial aid policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: All of the states offer need-based aid to part-time students—but one state only offers that aid to students at four-year institutions. More than half of the states offer financial aid for short-term, in-demand credentials.

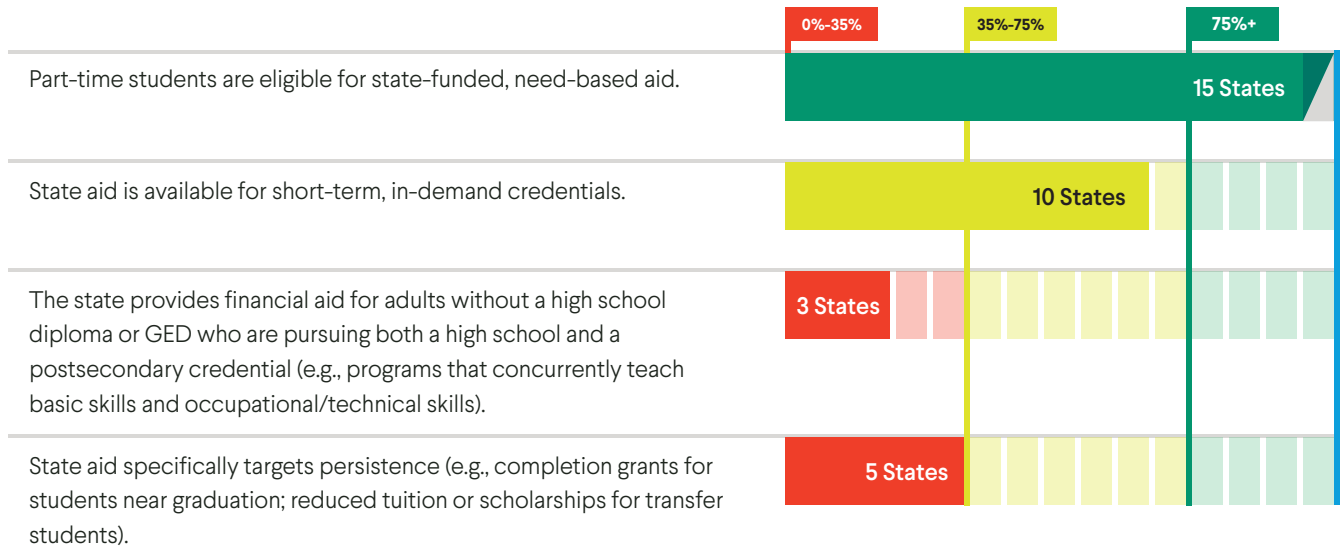


Critical gaps: Only one-third of the states offer financial aid as an incentive to encourage student persistence and completion. Very few of them make aid available to adults without a high school diploma or equivalency certificate.



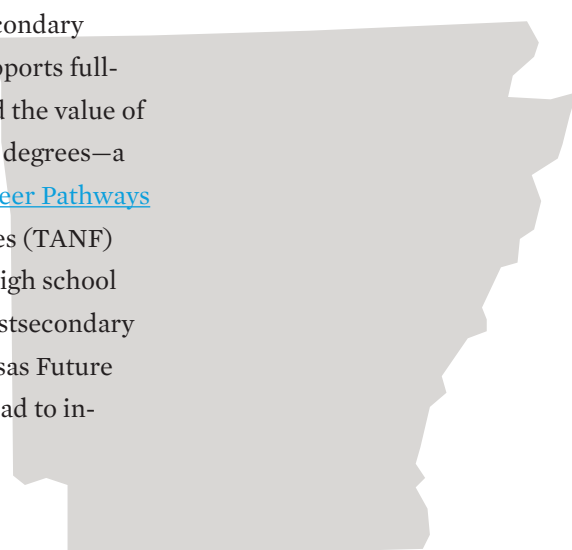
Ahead of the curve: Arkansas, California, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

State financial aid is flexible, accessible to different types of students, and incentivizes completion.



State Spotlight: **Arkansas**

Arkansas uses state and federal funding to create [financial aid programs](#) that support many types of students working toward a postsecondary credential. The state’s Academic Challenge grant program supports full- and part-time and traditional and nontraditional students, and the value of the grants increases as students get closer to completing their degrees—a model that encourages completion. The state’s innovative [Career Pathways](#) program uses federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to offer financial assistance to adults who don’t have a high school diploma who are simultaneously pursuing high school and postsecondary credentials. Finally, the state’s newest aid program, the Arkansas Future Grant, offers aid for two-year and short-term programs that lead to in-demand credentials, particularly in STEM fields.





Student Financial Stability

If students are hungry, unsure of where they will sleep, or worried about paying for basic needs, they will have difficulty studying and completing credentials. According to [a recent national survey](#), more than 40 percent of college students are food insecure, and almost half have experienced some level of housing insecurity.

JFF calls on states to adopt policies that enable community colleges to help students deal with economic insecurities. Specifically, states should offer emergency aid to help students cover unexpected life expenses. States should also help colleges develop the capacity to screen students to see if they are eligible for public assistance. States also should exercise the flexibility granted under federal policies to remove barriers to aid for students—for example, they could eliminate rules requiring students to work in order to receive aid. Additionally, states should take advantage of federal matching programs to provide low-income students with supplemental supports, such as tuition assistance or career coaching services. And because educational institutions may not be capable of providing students with non-academic services (e.g., mental health care or assistance with landlord-tenant disputes), states should give community colleges incentives to establish partnerships with community organizations that can provide such assistance.

Findings from 15-State Study



On average, one-third of the five recommended student financial stability policies have been adopted per state.



Signs of progress: About half of the states use federal funds to enhance college services for students on public assistance. Almost half of them fund emergency aid for students in crisis.

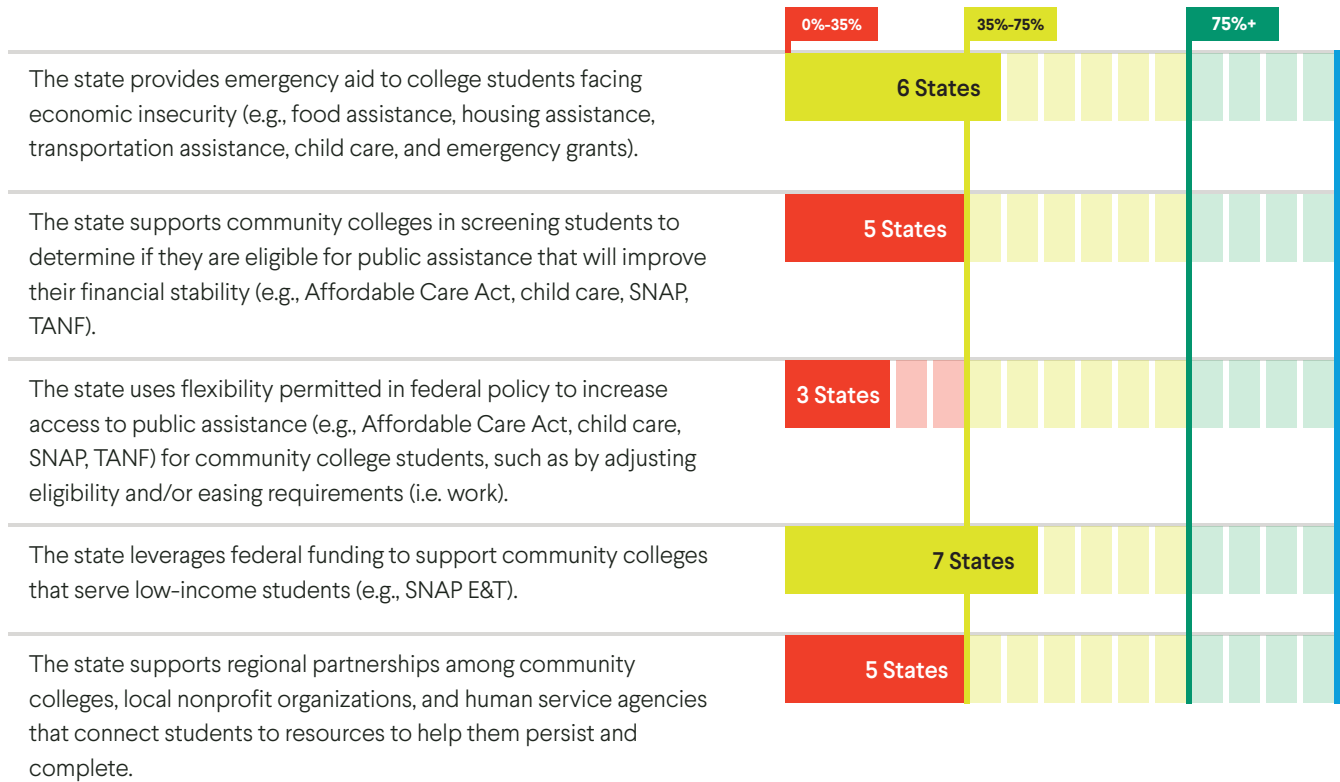


Critical gaps: Fewer states have enacted policies designed to break down barriers to public assistance for college students. Only one-third of them support colleges playing an expanded role in screening students for eligibility for public assistance or partnering with external providers of social services. Even fewer states are using the flexibility permitted in federal policy to increase access to public assistance for college students.



Ahead of the curve: Arkansas and Hawaii.

The state supports the financial stability of community college students and helps them complete a postsecondary credential.



State Spotlight: **Hawaii**

Recognizing the fact that many students face economic insecurities, Hawaii is taking a holistic approach to assessing students' needs and providing them with supports. In collaboration with the state's Department of Human Services, the University of Hawai'i Community College system has set up a program called [HiNet](#) that, among other things, uses state and federal SNAP Education and Training funds to help students cover the costs of basic needs. HiNet also provides community colleges with funds to cover the cost of having a staff member to determine whether students face barriers that may hinder their ability to succeed academically. The assessments identify students who require assistance with basic needs (e.g., food, housing, or child care) or face more complex problems, such as mental health issues. To ensure that students are able to get help with non-academic challenges, colleges forge partnerships with community organizations and that can provide the appropriate services.





Key Findings and Recommendations

Through our policy research, JFF found many instances where state policymakers are stepping up to create supportive policy conditions that we see as essential for catalyzing collective action and impact in addressing talent development, credential attainment, and economic advancement aims. We have documented positive trends in policy development and exemplary approaches undertaken by states. We also have uncovered critical gaps in policy, which has prompted us to note recommendations we hope will garner the attention and guide the action of policymakers.

Overall Results

States have adopted just over half of all elements of our 15 policy recommendations. This is true when looking at state adoption in the aggregate and in calculating the average. States averaged at least a 50 percent adoption rate across 10 of the policy recommendations. Meanwhile, states have subpar adoption rates in five policy areas. Figure 6 depicts average rates of policy adoption across the 15 states.

According to our research, **states have made the most progress in:**

- Establishing expectations that community college programs align to labor market demand (recommendation #4);
- Developing longitudinal data systems that provide the ability to track over time the educational and employment outcomes of students (#2); and
- Addressing barriers to college readiness, which left unchecked would hinder talent development aims (#8).

Yet in each case, there is still room for improvement.

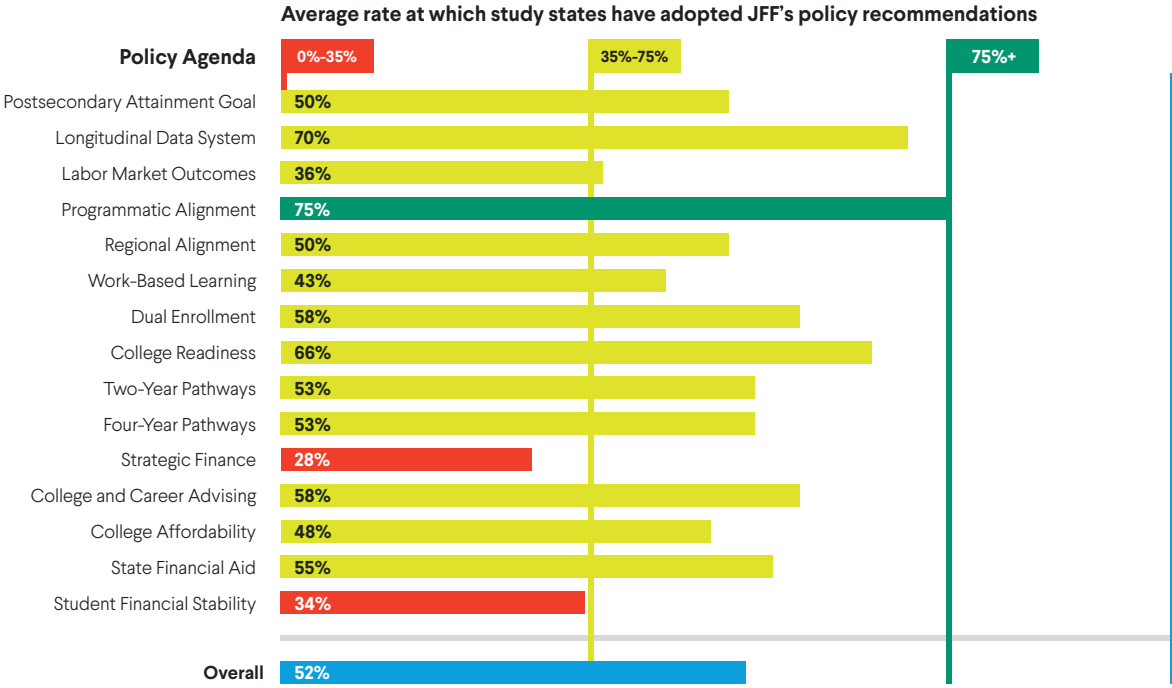
In contrast, we find that **states have made the least progress across the following three areas:**

- Providing community colleges with sufficient resources and appropriate incentives (#11);
- Addressing the holistic needs of students to strengthen their financial stability (#15); and
- Digging into labor market outcomes of students and postsecondary programs (#3).

Each of these areas consist of recommendations designed to push the envelope on postsecondary policies and practices typically undertaken in states.

FIGURE 6

State Adoption of JFF Policy Agenda



Key Findings

The *Smart Postsecondary Policies* agenda makes the case for tackling talent development and education attainment holistically. As such, in analyzing the results of our policy research, we endeavored to uncover common themes cutting across multiple recommendations, in order to assess state progress in creating conditions for lasting change and impact. We have grouped cross-cutting findings around data, postsecondary attainment, and systems alignment. Some of these key findings reflect achievements to build upon, while other findings represent critical gaps and areas for improvement.

States Are Data Rich, But Information Poor

Although data systems and high-level metrics are largely in place, states are not arming consumers, practitioners, leaders, and policymakers with actionable intelligence as well or as regularly as they should. This limited flow of information is hindering collective understanding and good decision making in addressing labor market needs, educational and employment outcomes of different types of students and programs, and the efficiency and affordability (or lack thereof) of various pathways to credential attainment. As a result, most states are not able to diagnose critical gaps and target policy interventions as appropriately as they should.

While most states have goals for attainment of educational credentials, few are maximizing their potential impact to catalyze collective action. Most states have barebone attainment goals, lacking clear objectives for achieving credentials of value that students need in order to succeed in existing and future jobs within regional economies. Moreover, despite population declines in transitional college-going populations, most states have not established clear priorities for increasing credential attainment among untapped sources of talent, such as low-income adults and students from underserved communities.

As a matter of course, many states expect that community colleges use regional labor market information and employer input to validate demand for their programs. **Setting a policy mandate to ensure labor market relevancy of postsecondary programs is hindered by limited availability and analysis of labor market data.** States need to delve deeper into the data to diagnose where employment outcomes are strongest and weakest among student populations and programs of study. Moreover, state longitudinal data systems are yielding limited research and analysis of student progression from high school to college and careers. Without sufficient data and analysis, states cannot take corrective action to rectify disparities and improve effectiveness and responsiveness of postsecondary programs to meeting labor market demand.

Moreover, while states have experimented with sector strategies and career pathways programs that pull together K-12, higher education, workforce, and business and industry, **few states have truly rallied these systems around a common set of in-demand jobs and a clear definition of living-wage career fields.**

Finally, states are lacking a clear picture of college affordability, which is undercutting efforts to improve it. Access to better information and deeper analysis would, ideally, create a sense of urgency for reforming outdated approaches to financial aid to address the holistic needs of students and the talent development goals of states. For instance, most states do not publicly divulge the amount of time it takes students to earn a degree, even though this information would improve their understanding of the opportunity costs that students incur to go to college. Nor do most states differentiate the cost of attendance by different institutions and by higher-cost and lower-cost geographic locations. Moreover, most states do not track and report average unmet financial needs of students by their household configuration, type of credential, and/or income level.

Expanding Access Is Not Enough in the Race for Talent or the Drive for Economic Advancement for All

College access remains a very active policy area, with **many states focused on exposing high school students to colleges, promoting free tuition, and eliminating other barriers to college entry.** This focus on getting more students into college—especially through the traditional high school-to-college pipeline—is reflected in heightened policy activity on dual enrollment and college promise programs. States also are paying much attention—and have made much progress—in eliminating obstacles that many students encounter when first entering college. The majority of states in our study now support the use of multiple measures for assessment and placement, co-requisite remediation, and differentiated math pathways—all of which are proven to accelerate entry and completion of college-level gateway math and English courses.

However, boosting access alone will not translate into increased credential attainment and talent development. **Policy conditions for improving student retention, completion, and career connection are less developed than access-focused approaches.** States could do more to streamline pathways to credential attainment and to provide students with the many types of support services they need along the way.

Moving from an access mission to a success mission is difficult, time consuming, and costly, yet states recorded the lowest rates of policy adoption among the strategic finance recommendations. This is alarming because, without sufficient resources and appropriate incentives, community colleges will struggle with capacity to help more students achieve college and career success, despite mounting evidence of what works. **Moreover, states should deploy technical assistance and capacity-building resources to help more community colleges clearly map out pathways and build high-quality college and career advising systems, so that more students**

can make well-informed decisions and receive the support they need to proceed to credential completion.

Despite the heightened concern about student loan debt and growing interest in promise programs as a means to make college tuition free, **states still have much work to do to ease financial burdens facing students and to incentivize their persistence and completion.**

This would entail strengthening access to wraparound supports (e.g., public assistance programs and other services, such as affordable child care and transportation), ensuring transfer students have equal access to aid; investing in retention grants; extending aid to nontraditional students, adult returners, and short-term programs; and aligning aid to the career-building needs and employment realities of students via high-quality, paid, work-based learning experiences, including internships, apprenticeships, and work-study programs. We find that states have much room for improvement in modernizing their financial aid approaches to meet these needs.

Better Align Systems To Maximize Impact

A common theme in our policy analysis is that, although partnerships across systems are occurring, states need to do more to align systems to boost credential attainment, build strong connections to work, and bolster wraparound supports for students to ensure they can reach their potential.

Community colleges cannot address skill and equity gaps alone. However, **few states have developed coherent talent development strategies or have done enough to foster stronger collaboration and shared accountability across education, workforce, and human services systems.** Few states have established strong working relationships between postsecondary

and human services agencies to leverage collective resources and services to address economic insecurities of students. Moreover, there have been only modest state efforts to support regional approaches to talent development, such as sector strategies and career pathways. The same could be said about investing in community-based models that reengage disconnected youth and help adults in basic skills programs enter college and earn a postsecondary credential with labor market value.

Further, our research reveals **a need for more states to foster deeper collaboration across K-12, community colleges, and universities in supporting student progression toward their desired credential.** States should set clear expectations and accountability standards for clear and efficient pathways from dual enrollment to two-year degrees and on to four-year degrees.

States should pay closer attention to addressing inequities in access to and success in these pathways. More states need to expand high-quality dual enrollment programs in low-income and disadvantaged communities. Moreover, states should ensure that transfer students have the same access to course offerings and financial aid as other four-year students. Following the lead of a few states, more states should reward postsecondary institutions for achieving strong outcomes among disadvantaged student populations.

Recommendations for Policymakers

JFF's research uncovered many examples where community colleges and their regional partners are on the vanguard of change, in the absence of an enabling and supportive state policy environment. Despite the lack of policy supports, local examples abound of market-driven programs of study, industry sector partnerships, and work-based learning initiatives, for instance. Moreover, many institutions are focusing on student success reforms, such as implementing guided pathways and redesigning their college and career advising structures, without much state policy or funding support. Just imagine how much wider and deeper the impact on students and our economy would be if states played a more active role in scaling proven practices.

Policymakers need to tackle aggressively intractable and thorny issues, such as skilled workforce shortages, inequities in education and economic outcomes, and economic insecurities facing today's students. We recommend that these six principles guide the action of policy makers.

1. **Set clear, ambitious, and equitable policy goals** and target investments and interventions to meet these goals. Make equity a primary goal; otherwise policies and programs will reinforce inequities.
2. **Foster an environment of data use, including labor market information**, to improve decision making by learners, families, communities, institutions, and governments.

3. **Instill the importance of inclusive and meaningful partnerships** between the business community and education and training systems to ensure learners gain the skills and knowledge they need for work and for career advancement.
4. **Pay close attention to transition points** because reducing friction when students move from one institution to another—or from one learning experience to another—reaps major dividends in saved time and money.
5. **Support and incentivize evidence-based reforms so that institutions and systems can scale what works.** Special initiatives and pockets of innovation will not suffice.
6. **Invest sufficient resources in learners, institutions, and regions** because policy goals are otherwise unachievable.

No state will thrive if its response to the intertwining challenges of talent development, educational achievement, and economic advancement is tepid or misplaced. It's time for policy to catch up.

Research Methodology

JFF analyzed the postsecondary education policies of 15 states in a comprehensive, multiphase process. The research began in the fall of 2018. We collected policy information directly from the state or postsecondary system through their publicly available websites, reports, or other sources. We also reviewed other reputable third-party sources, such as recently conducted 50-state policy scans.

Between December 2018 and March 2019, we conducted phone interviews with representatives of organizations within each state that are active in JFF's Postsecondary State Network, such as the state's community college system office and the community college association. The purpose of these calls was to share preliminary results, check for accuracy, and gather missing information. During each call, we invited input to correct or adjust any preliminary information. As needed, we asked those interviewed to supply additional information to demonstrate the existence of state policy and to confirm that it met our threshold for the policy recommendation (see "*Thresholds*" below). Following the round of calls, we conducted a final review, asking states to verify our adjusted results. In April 2019, we provided finalized results to those interviewed.

Defining "Policy" and "Policymakers"

Deciding what counts as "policy" and who counts as "policymakers" can be tricky, as definitions vary by context. For the purposes of this study, the policymakers who create, influence, and measure the effectiveness of policies include the state legislature and governor, state agencies, and state system offices. Considering policy at both the state and system levels, we gave credit for adopting five types of policy:

1. **Enabling policies** that encourage innovation and action, with the goal of accelerating implementation of evidence-based practices.
2. **Policy directives** that set clear expectations and deadlines for postsecondary practitioners and partners to take action.
3. **Intensive technical assistance** that is deployed statewide to support practitioners and partners.
4. **Financial resources**, such as seed funding, incentives, and tax policy changes, that inject much-needed investment into the implementation and scaling of evidence-based approaches.
5. **Data and metrics** and their collection and reporting systems, which seek to measure meaningful education and labor market outcomes, and make information available to the public to guide their education decisions and hold systems accountable.

Thresholds and Quality Control

Each state develops and executes policy differently; there are no silver bullets or one-size-fits-all approaches. We have endeavored to reflect these nuances in our assessment of state policies in each recommendation and its corresponding elements. In doing so, we sought to determine whether a given activity had resulted from a state-level action, as opposed to a collection of local activities. Anything determined to be the latter was not included in our results.

Further, we looked for the *presence* of state- or system-level policy. It was outside the scope of the project to assess the *quality* of policy implementation.



88 Broad St., 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110

122 C St., NW, Suite 280, Washington, DC 20001

505 14th St., Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

TEL 617.728.4446 **WEB** www.jff.org