



Higher Education Should Be Applicable

Policymakers can support alignment between employers and higher education systems to ensure that credentials and degrees are applicable to state workforce needs.

According to a recent report, “57% of U.S. employees are either actively seeking or open to a new job.”⁵³ However, the number of available positions currently exceeds the number of unemployed Americans.⁵⁴ A 2019 study estimates that by 2029, the United States could face a shortage of about 765,000 workers needing some college and about 8.6 million workers needing at least a bachelor’s degree.⁵⁵ Another study predicts that the United States could lose about \$1.7 trillion in revenue by 2030 due to labor shortages.⁵⁶

This workforce gap cannot be filled by traditional students alone. Due to a drop in birth rates after the Great Recession, it is expected that the college-age population in the United States will decrease by approximately 15% between 2025 and 2029, with additional decreases in the following years.⁵⁷ Working adult learners are uniquely positioned to fill the workforce gap because many of them desire career advancement and need further training.⁵⁸ While taking postsecondary courses is an important step, it is not enough. A recent report on working adult learners states, “A higher education experience that doesn’t help working adult students achieve better alignment with their career goals isn’t serving them.”⁵⁹

To ensure that all learners are prepared for current and future job markets, policymakers must support efforts that align educational offerings with

workforce needs. Successful programs for working adult learners, particularly rising and stranded talent, embed career connections into each step of the learning process.⁶⁰ In-demand and job-specific skills are integrated into all courses, internships and apprenticeships give students hands-on training, and out-of-class support and resources are easily accessible. In addition, program elements are developed in tandem with employers and industry representatives who understand the skills and experiences needed in the workforce.



Learner Profile

Antonesha Lewis

Oklahoma
B.S. Nursing

Antonesha is a pediatric registered nurse. As a single mother, she knew that 43% of single mothers drop out of college, and only 31% of single mothers ages 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree. She beat those odds while also working two jobs, and she chose nursing because her daughter has epilepsy. An advocate for healthy families and higher education, Antonesha earned her B.S. in nursing from Western Governors University in 2021.

Policy Recommendations in Action

Create standard skills definitions that align with workforce needs.

Established in 2020, the Open Skills Network (OSN) is a partnership of employers, educational institutions, and technology providers.⁶¹ OSN is creating a library of skills definitions that can help align educational offerings with workforce needs. Western Governors University (WGU), a partner in the OSN, has released 16 skills library collections.⁶²

Develop public and private partnerships to increase workforce opportunities.

Building partnerships and designating funding to build and scale solutions for in-demand and highly needed programs is key to meeting individuals' employment needs and a state's workforce goals. Working adult learners need access to quick, efficient, high-quality workforce solutions, especially in newer, quickly changing occupations and future-facing careers. WGU can be a partner in these efforts.

- Idaho Launch is an online career and training research hub that addresses workforce issues.⁶³ Idaho Launch also offers training funds for Idahoans who intend to work in **Idaho**, covering about 75–100% of training costs.⁶⁴
- **Missouri's** Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant addresses workforce needs by encouraging adults to pursue certificates, degrees, or industry-recognized credentials in high-need areas.⁶⁵

Expand apprenticeship programs.

In 2022, the Council of State Governments (CSG) and the Urban Institute received funding from Ascendium Education Group to expand civic sector apprenticeship programs in **Idaho** and **Maine** targeting low-income rural learners. CSG and the Urban Institute "will support state and local agencies in developing apprenticeships to meet their workforce needs, and in recruiting, enrolling and supporting low-income rural apprentices."⁶⁷

WGU in Action

Iowa's Teacher & Paraeducator Registered Apprenticeship Program provides a no-cost opportunity for existing paraeducators to earn a bachelor's degree while learning and working in the classroom. WGU is partnered with more than 60 mostly rural school districts in Iowa as an education provider for this program.⁶⁸

Learn More

This information has been taken from WGU's State Public Playbook. If you would like to view the references or access the full playbook, please visit <https://tinyurl.com/wguspp>.