



Removing Barriers for Working Learners Series

Build On-Ramps to Work

2022 State Policy Playbook





Removing Barriers for Working Learners

Build On-Ramps to Work

Western Governors University's *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series is intended to capture the central public policy lessons learned through Western Governors University's (WGU) history of serving learners—particularly working learners—and is reinforced by our experiences over the past few years. From its founding, WGU has been and continues to be driven to design solutions to answer the critically important question: **What do learners need, particularly working learners?** WGU believes higher education must:

- Personalize learning
- Create affordable, accessible, and equitable pathways to opportunity
- Build on-ramps to work
- Provide whole-learner support services

These are critical elements for working adults, without which successful upskilling and reskilling opportunities cannot happen. But all learners benefit from a higher education

model built on these priorities. When learners benefit, society benefits. College graduates are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to make significantly higher wages over a lifetime, allowing them to contribute to economic growth and vital communities. Conversely, they are less likely to need state assistance through the form of programs like the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income, preserving resources that can be devoted elsewhere. When higher education fulfills its purpose—providing pathways to opportunity—individuals and communities thrive.

Utilizing the lessons learned from COVID-19 and the nimbleness of institutions like WGU, postsecondary education can continue to transform itself, and in doing so, can change the economic and workforce future of our communities. This issue of *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* shares recommendations state policymakers can use to ensure education and workforce work hand in hand, **building on-ramps to work** for learners.

We believe in building on-ramps to workforce needs.

Since its inception, WGU has focused intently on its role in preparing individuals for success in the workplace. Working learners expect nothing less. WGU offers degrees only in in-demand areas, continually prioritizes skills, and regularly collaborates with workforce partners to ensure programs align with their needs. These efforts translate to [success for WGU graduates](#). For example, 97% of employers reported WGU graduates were prepared for their jobs, 87% rated their performance as very good or excellent, and 97% said WGU graduates exceeded their expectations.

It is time for the larger system to break down the silos between education providers and employers. Working learners invest their time and effort in education to create new opportunities for themselves and their families. There must be a payoff for that investment. Education must center itself on

in-demand skills. As technology fuels continued changes in those skills, we must create new opportunities for learners to gain marketable skills in degree or credential programs and easily advance their skills throughout their lifetimes.

Learners have always deserved educational opportunities aligned with workforce needs and employment opportunities, but the significant rise in the cost of higher education has made this alignment even more critical. For many individuals contemplating college or workers considering reskilling or upskilling, calculating the return on investment—not only of money but also of time—is crucial. We must bring government, businesses, education leaders, and other relevant partners to the table to devise solutions that bridge education and work.



Policy Recommendations

Shifting to a skill-focused rather than a degree-focused higher education system will unlock the ability of students to articulate the high-demand skills they have gained and find the meaningful work they seek. From an employer perspective, it will become easier to identify individuals with both the hard and soft skills needed to succeed. Policymakers can help create a skills-focused higher education system by following these four recommendations:

- Put skills at the forefront
- Upskill and reskill existing staff
- Strengthen workforce connections
- Integrate work experience

Recommendation: Put Skills at the Forefront

Higher education is habitually driven by the degree as the unit of higher education measurement, which leaves individuals with workforce training or some credits but no degree without any verifiable educational credentials. It is time to embrace skills as the currency of education and the driver of curriculum and outcomes. This includes establishing partnerships to innovate, develop, and scale new pathways in highly in-demand skill areas. Building partnerships and designating funding to build and scale solutions for in-demand and highly needed programs is key to meeting individuals' employment needs, as well as a state's workforce goals. Learners and workers 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.

Per the Open Skills Network, a "skill" represents knowledge, abilities, or learned behaviors described in a short phrase that communicates discrete, discernable value an individual can demonstrate or acquire.

Recommendation in Action

- States can partner with [efforts already underway](#) to pilot and adopt the use of a Learning Employment Record (LER), a learner-owned, skills-based transcript that takes the traditional academic transcript to a new level—one that includes academic records, certifications, work accomplishments, and descriptions of accumulated skills.

The Open Skills Network defines Learning Employment Records (LER) as "comprehensive, exchangeable digital records of achievements learned in school, on the job, through volunteer experiences, or in the military and may be represented as skills, competencies, course, certifications, degrees, and other credentials. LERs may also contain validated work history, portfolio artifact/evidence, self-asserted accomplishments, etc. Learners control their privacy, discovery, and sharing of their LER."

- The [Open Skills Management Tool](#) (OSMT) is a free, open-source tool to facilitate the production of rich skills descriptors (RSDs) that help create a common language for skills across institutions and employers. WGU partnered in the launch of the [Open Skills Network](#) (OSN) in 2020, which served to increase collaboration between employers, educational institutions, and others working to ensure freely available tools to promote skills-based learning and hiring. When it comes to creating technical solutions for the benefit of all learners, more minds are better than one.
- Alabama launched the Alabama Credential Registry to catalog degree and non-degree offerings in the state, which will work in tandem with the Alabama Skills-Based Job Description Generator and Employer Portal, as well the Alabama College and Career Exploration Tool, to connect employers and employees in a [skills-based talent development system](#).

Recommendation: Upskill and Reskill Existing Staff

Many critical workforce needs can be met by providing paths for existing staff to upgrade their skills. The education field provides a perfect illustration of both the potential and the need. With an alarming and growing [shortage of classroom teachers](#), innovative pathways are essential to filling the gaps and meeting the needs of today's learners across the educational continuum. Upskilling paraprofessionals holds immense potential: paraprofessionals work in districts already and have a commitment to students. Providing pathways for paraprofessionals to become teachers is an opportunity to diversify the educator pool, improve student outcomes, and in doing so, create systemic change.

Similarly, many healthcare systems recognize the value of supporting existing staff in upgrading their skills to [fill critical workforce shortages](#) and have focused on "retrain to retain" programs. With these types of upskilling and reskilling programs, workers can earn higher-level credentials and better pay while meeting critical workforce needs. Additionally, this helps organizations build their resiliency. As [McKinsey & Company noted](#), "Adapting employees' skills and roles to the post-pandemic ways of working will be crucial to building operating-model resilience." The pace of technological change guarantees that the ability of a company to adapt and thrive depends on facilitating pathways for employees to upgrade their skills continually.

Recommendation in Action

- New Mexico's [Grow Your Own Teachers](#) program offers scholarships and a pathway for educational assistants to become fully licensed classroom teachers.
- Tennessee provided [new upskilling opportunities](#) for direct care staff in healthcare by designing a competency-based training program with valuable short-term credentials embedded. [The Tennessee Promise](#) and [Tennessee Reconnect Funds](#) help keep costs low for working learners.
- Nebraska's [Career Pathway Advancement Project](#) seeks to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities and employers by providing upskilling opportunities in high-demand fields through apprenticeship and training.





Recommendation: Strengthen Workforce Connections and Integrate Work Experience

The relationship between education and the workforce can and must be collaborative and integrated. Institutions and training providers should work closely with employers to ensure the curriculum reflects the most in-demand skills on the front end. During education, while learners and workers earn new skills, they should have the opportunity to apply and stack demonstrated skills toward a recognized degree or credential valued by employers. WGU's College of Health Professions [recently redesigned the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program](#) to do precisely that, allowing learners to accumulate six credentials on the way to a degree. Lastly, there should also be a way for workplace learning experiences to be recognized and incorporated into an individual's identified set of skills. We are entering a new generation of opportunities, hastened by rapidly changing technology and a global pandemic that must include short-term, competency-based workplace-based training and programs.

Recommendation in Action

- In the wake of COVID-19, individual health departments nationwide hired hundreds of contact tracers to work with patients to identify and stem potential chains of disease transmission. Johns Hopkins University created a [5.5-hour course](#) offering a training certificate for individuals to enter this line of work very quickly. This is a timely example of how higher education institutions can work with government agencies to promptly set up programs that address an urgent workforce need and provide a pathway for retraining displaced workers.
- Institutions and states are looking at ways they can harness the power of CBE to help [address critical workforce shortages in early childhood education](#). Illinois, one leader in this space, has worked with the licensing body to have the same competencies and definitions embedded in curriculum across state institutions.
- WGU, like many other institutions, has [national](#) and local advisory boards composed of business, philanthropic, and education leaders who provide counsel to ensure workforce-relevant programs.
- [New Mexico](#) used federal funds from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to create the New Mexico Workforce Connection Center, enabling employers and job seekers to leverage resources, including skills assessments and on-the-job training programs to address skills gaps. Funding is available for positions in in-demand industries.

The Path Forward

WGU has always been and always will be committed to continually evolving to meet the needs of contemporary learners. The lessons learned from COVID-19 have sharpened this commitment. It is more urgent than ever that education be customizable, affordable, accessible, and provide learners with the skills needed for in-demand jobs.

Higher education institutions and their related policies must continually assess their performance to serve learners better and remain relevant. WGU's decades of experience across states and with hundreds of thousands of students has led us to focus our policy efforts on the most pressing needs of working learners, which in turn helps all learners.

We believe education must:

- Personalize learning
- Create affordable, accessible, and equitable pathways to opportunity
- Build on-ramps to work
- Provide whole-learner support services

State policymakers have an unprecedented opportunity to remake education in their states. As they do so, we hope the *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series offers an innovative and helpful framework to guide that challenging yet exciting work.

Other policy insights in the *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series:



Personalize Learning



Create affordable,
accessible, and
equitable pathways to
opportunity



Provide whole-learner
support services

Learn More

We can rebuild American higher education together by developing a more adaptive, integrated educational model that harnesses the power of technology to respond to learners, rather than requiring learners to fit into an outdated model that serves neither learners nor employers well. State policymakers have an unprecedented opportunity to remake education in their states. As they do so, we hope the *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series offers an innovative and helpful framework to guide this challenging yet exciting work.

Please contact the WGU Public Policy Office at PublicPolicy@wgu.edu for more information.