



**JOBS FOR THE FUTURE**

**Written Testimony  
of  
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**Before the  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions**

***Attaining a Quality Degree: Innovations to Improve Student Success*  
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## **U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions**

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**Senior Vice President, Jobs for the Future**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for inviting me here today—and for assembling such a strong group of panelists to discuss innovative strategies for student success.

My name is Richard Kazis. I am Senior Vice President at Jobs for the Future, a 25-year-old national research and policy organization based in Boston committed to helping increase the number of underprepared youth and adults who earn a first postsecondary credential. JFF works with innovators around the country—with K-12 and higher education leaders, state education and workforce systems, community-based organizations, employers and their associations—to identify and increase the scale of programs and approaches that help more Americans succeed in quality higher education programs aligned with labor market demand.

### **A Period of Change and Innovation in Higher Education**

Higher education is frequently derided as resistant to change, an immovable defender of tradition. If we went back to the colleges we attended, the argument goes, we would feel pretty much at home, even after several decades away.

But in fact this is not an accurate characterization of higher education today, particularly at those institutions that serve the majority of college students—community colleges, less-selective four-year public institutions, and the growing online segment of higher education.

Higher education is in the early stages of a period of significant innovation, of rethinking the structure and delivery of college programs, expectations about student learning, and what it takes to help more students choose well in college, persist in their chosen program, and succeed. Across the country, there has been a sea change in the past decade in the commitment of forward-looking colleges and universities to student success. We have a long way to go, but a growing cadre of innovative institutional and state system leaders are demonstrating that significant improvements in learning and completion for large numbers of students are within reach.

Four of the best are on the panel today.

The past decade has witnessed a huge shift in thinking about higher education's goals: from a dominant focus on student *access* to higher education to a recognition that higher education institutions have an equal responsibility to improve student *success*—entry into quality programs, persistence, completion, and advancement in the labor market. Several factors have combined to drive this change.

- Higher education has become the primary gateway to economic success, and tuition and debt have risen steadily. The economic costs of poor performance have become very high.
- At the same time, in this era of increasingly constrained public investment, accountability for results from every public dollar has become a central concern in debates on state higher education budgets and investments.
- Data systems tracking student performance have become more robust, thanks in part to significant federal investment in state longitudinal data systems. Gaps in college persistence and completion have become more visible. And better data has also helped fuel the growth of solid research on effective strategies for helping different population groups learn at higher levels and succeed in college.

This is the context within which institutional and state-level innovations to improve student success are taking shape. Persistence, quality, and completion have become equal legs of the higher education stool, along with access and affordability. And institutional and state leaders are responding. While innovation needs to spread farther and faster, with the help of supportive policies and the diffusion of effective practices, many states and their colleges and universities are taking on this agenda—and beginning to see results.

Today, I will comment on the innovation we see getting traction in higher education institutions and systems around the country. I will: 1) characterize the problem that many of the most promising efforts are addressing and the kinds of solutions that are emerging; 2) provide examples of how states and institutions are reforming basic aspects of instruction and delivery to achieve better outcomes; and 3) suggest actions Congress can take to support and accelerate these trends, with particular attention to ensuring improved learning and labor market outcomes for low-income, traditional and first-generation college-goers.

### **“A Shapeless River on a Dark Night”**

Too many students in higher education never find their way, lose their way early in their college career, or have to stop out before they earn credentials that help them move ahead. The structure of higher education itself stands in the way of many students' success, particularly first-generation, underprepared, and low-income students with limited experience of what college demands.

Students underprepared for college level work face huge challenges, and over 40 percent of all college students require some math or English remediation. Yet only

25 percent of developmental education students in community college earn *any* credential within eight years. The current model of delivering basic skills as a stand-alone pre-requisite results in the loss of too many students who could have quickly succeeded in college-level courses with well-designed academic support.

Students who balance family, school and work need alternatives to traditional programs and delivery strategies that take too long to complete. Forty percent of public college and university students are able to attend only part-time—and that one decision results in completion rates as much as 30 percent lower than those for their full-time peers.

In American higher education, the most efficient and appropriate routes for students to take—from choice of school and program to decisions about course loads and schedules—are poorly marked. Students don't have the information they need about the programs available to them—the course sequences and requirements, the odds of completion given their academic preparation, transfer requirements, or labor market pay off. Students have limited guidance and are overwhelmed by too many options. Columbia University Teachers College researcher Judith Scott-Clayton has written, "For many students at community colleges, finding a path to a degree is the equivalent of navigating a shapeless river on a dark night."

### **An Emerging Consensus on Innovation Priorities: Completion Pathways**

A consensus has emerged across public higher education—in community colleges in particular but also among four-year systems—that the students least prepared for college success need much more help navigating the "shapeless river": before they enroll in college, when they first enroll, and throughout their college careers. They need more information about their options and the outcomes they should expect from different programs and far more guidance at every step of the way on how to persist, learn the right things, and complete requirements as efficiently as possible. At the same time, they need options that are more streamlined, more choices that respond to their need for flexibility in learning delivery, and pathways to completion that are more transparent and clear.

This consensus has spawned a range of creative innovations in the design and delivery of postsecondary education that are showing promise as strategies to meet students where they are and help them achieve greater success in both college and the labor market. Innovations like those you will hear about today are based on a few core principles of efficient *completion pathways* that provide faster, highly structured academic experiences for students, even as they increase the ability of individuals to make informed choices about potential programs based on their structure, delivery, content, and expected outcomes. These principles are:

- Acceleration

- More personalized learning and advising
- Clear pathways through college to credentials with value
- Effective on ramps for underprepared students
- Better assessment of learning quality and value
- Reforms built for large-scale impact from the outset

**Acceleration** is perhaps the overarching design principle, recognizing the growing imperative to help students advance more quickly towards their goals and toward credentials. These strategies, many of which break with traditional college practices, schedules and requirements, include:

- Redesigned remedial education delivery that minimizes the need for long stand-alone sequences of developmental courses that keep too many from ever entering or succeeding in their chosen program of study
- Degree programs broken down into shorter modules and “stackable” intermediate credentials that enable individuals to earn a credential with labor market value, advance at work, and then return to complete additional modules that roll up to a higher-level credential
- Early college and career pathways programs that span different segments of the education system and speed students’ progress across them (e.g., from K-12, adult education or programs serving disconnected youth to postsecondary credits and success)
- Credit for prior learning that recognizes students’ current skills and speeds up their attainment of credential and degree requirements
- Other competency-based programs and strategies that make it possible for students to advance at their own pace through basic skills, credit courses, and degree or certificate programs

**More personalized learning and advising:** Innovative colleges are becoming more responsive to the varied needs of individual students rather than prioritizing institutional and faculty considerations. They are experimenting with flexible delivery of coursework through online or blended learning, adapting scheduling to the needs of working students, and testing competency-based approaches to earning credits and credentials. They also recognize that students need much better information and advising on their course and program options, both in-person and online, from the moment they enroll and throughout their education. To complement overextended counseling staff, a growing number are turning to online advising tools that integrate career exploration, program choice, course planning, and—for students who are having trouble meeting course or program requirements efficiently—early warning notification and referral to academic and other support services. Sophisticated new “real time” labor market information tools are being used to help institutions revamp curricula to better meet regional employer needs—and to helping students make better informed choices among potential programs of study.

**Clearer pathways from program enrollment to credentials:** To increase the likelihood of timely and efficient completion, institutions and systems are redesigning many programs of study to have fewer electives, a clearer sequence and progression of courses required for completion, and more transparent presentation to students of the expectations for and past outcomes of those pathways. Some articulate these shorter certificates, one to the next, in “stackable” credentials that ultimately lead to terminal credentials or degrees in a field of study. Some are rolling back the number of credits required for completing certain programs, focusing training on students’ skills gaps and, as described above, providing credit for prior learning or certificates. To strengthen these pathways, a growing number of systems and colleges are using better labor market information to define learning outcomes and shape curricula. To ensure that transfer of general education and program of study credits is simplified, states and higher education systems are reviewing and aligning program requirements within and across sectors.

**On-ramps to college success:** For underprepared and first-generation college students, both youth and adults, these innovations will have limited value without new and more effective on-ramps that prepare students with the academic and non-academic skills they need to succeed in college. Partnerships between K-12, adult education, and postsecondary education institutions are emerging to ready underprepared youth and adults for postsecondary success. Dual enrollment and early college programs in high schools provide high school students with a college-going culture and college credits that can reduce the cost and time commitment required to complete a college program. Career pathways programs for low-skilled adults and disconnected youth co-enroll students in adult education and postsecondary occupational coursework, providing college credit to students while they are still working on their basic academic or English language skills. Reconnection pathways for disconnected youth implemented by partnerships between colleges and national youth-serving networks such as the Corps Network, the National Youth Employment Coalition, and YouthBuildUSA show promising enrollment and persistence improvements in early research. These and other similar models show great promise in terms of college readiness, enrollment, credits, acceleration and persistence for these populations.

**Better assessment of learning quality and value:** Just as in K-12 reform, an early focus on gaps in college completion has led to greater attention to questions of the quality of the learning and return on investment in postsecondary education. Systems and institutions are making learning expectations clearer and experimenting with better ways to assess learning and measure learning outcomes. This can be seen in foundation-funded and other initiatives to define and assess learning quality. But it is also evident in the growing efforts to get feedback from employers on the productivity and contribution of new graduates from specific pathway programs and to use that feedback to improve curricula. In the coming years, attention to specifying the value added of higher education for further education and employment will only increase.

**Building in scale from the beginning:** What is striking about much of the current wave of reform is its ambition and reach. Impatient with the proliferation of small, boutique programs that are high cost and difficult to replicate at large scale, reformers in higher education are looking to create innovations that reach large numbers of students quickly by changing some of the core practices of institutions, such as the delivery of remedial instruction, the process for assessing competencies and granting postsecondary credit, student advising and orientation, and the alignment of learning expectations and career pathways across institutions and sectors.

## **Evidence of Progress and Scale**

A growing body of evidence points to the potential for impact of reforms informed by these principles. Here are a few examples:

- **Redesigns of developmental education** that minimize time spent in developmental courses in favor of placing students into college level courses with aligned and contextualized academic supports are demonstrating dramatic early results.

For example, The Accelerated Learning Program at the Community College of Baltimore County, designed for students who enroll in upper-level developmental writing, “mainstreams” students into introductory college-level English, but requires a companion course to help them succeed. Researchers found that 82 percent of ALP students passed English 101 within one year, compared with 69 percent of students who took the more traditional sequence. Other gains included higher rates of completion in the next credit English course, stronger persistence to the next year, and completion of more college-level courses. A cost-effective alternative, it has already been adopted by over 100 colleges; and Arkansas, Indiana and Michigan have launched statewide implementations.

Statway, a one-year math course that combines remediation with a first year college statistics course, is having similar success. In second year results across 30 campuses in eight states, over 50 percent of participating developmental math students successfully completed a college level math course, compared to 9-16 percent of students in traditional remedial sequences.

- **Career Pathways programs**, which redesign the delivery of career-focused education, training, and employment services to be more integrated, aligned, and participant-centered, are also showing clear gains in student success.

Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST), which combines basic skills and occupational training in the same courses, is

a pioneer in contextualized instruction for adults. Quasi-experimental studies have found that I-BEST students complete more credits, have higher persistence rates, and are more likely to earn a certificate than their peers. Around the country, colleges and states are using lessons from I-BEST to create career pathways that accelerate and structure progress to credentials with value in the labor market.

- **Early college and dual enrollment approaches** to aligning and accelerating college readiness and success for underprepared young people yield consistently strong outcomes.

Early college high schools around the country, serving a largely low-income, first-generation population, have a four-year graduation rate of 93 percent (compared to the national rate of 78 percent. More impressive, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of students earn an associates degree or certificate by the time they finish high school and 94 percent earn some college credits, with the average being 36 credit earned, saving time and money on the way to a postsecondary credential.

Dual enrollment has become an important accelerator for high school students. Student participation in dual enrollment is positively related to higher GPA, more credit accumulation, and higher rates of college enrollment and persistence. One recent study found that dual enrollment students at the University of Texas-Pan American had a 49 percent four-year graduation rate, compared with 14 percent for the total student body.

Innovations like these are yielding promising results at institutions where they are implemented.

Equally important, these and other promising efforts built on the principles of more efficient completion pathways to credentials, are diffusing nationally as institutions and state systems are eager to identify evidence-based and efficient strategies for improving institutional performance and student success.

Here are some examples of such diffusion and scale:

Many states are undertaking full-scale redesigns of the delivery of developmental education, including Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. Virginia, for example, has completely overhauled delivery of developmental education at all 23 of its community colleges—a bold approach that required major changes to everything from assessment and placement to financial aid administration. Colorado’s community college system is implementing a creative statewide approach to developmental education redesign that reduces remediation dramatically, pushes more students into credit courses with appropriate supports, and aligns basic skill requirements with the English and math demands of different pathways to credentials. As you will hear from the



representative of Austin Peay University, Tennessee is a leader in this redesign across both its two- and four-year institutions.

Jobs for the Future is a national assistance partner to Completion by Design, a structured pathways redesign initiative that involves 9 community colleges across the states of Florida, North Carolina and Ohio. Based on a sweeping analysis of their student outcomes data for different population groups and programs, these colleges are implementing model pathways to completion that are built upon the foundation of the principles highlighted here, such as: more active “on-boarding” activities such as mandatory orientation; structured and streamlined programs of study; intensive advising and career counseling; developmental education redesign and acceleration into credit courses; and supports designed to keep students engaged and progressing toward a credential with labor market value. North Carolina’s community college system has incorporated this approach into its overall success agenda and is rolling it out across the state’s institutions.

Kentucky’s community and technical college system has created a statewide online competency-based learning program, primarily for working adults, called Learn on Demand. Learn on Demand offers both full courses and modules that last about 3-5 weeks. Students can start whenever they want, take what they need, and earn credit for every module completed. Modules build toward complete courses for accredited, affordable degrees, certificates, and diplomas. Programs are transferable and accredited and are recognized across the state’s 16 two-year colleges. Learn on Demand is only one component of the state’s approach to creating flexible career pathways that help students move more quickly to credentials. Kentucky is part of a seven-state initiative called Accelerating Opportunity that is adapting I-BEST career pathways model to Kentucky’s regional employer base. Kentucky is also a leader in the testing of using innovative “real time” labor market information to help shape program curricula and inform students’ choice of program.

These are but a few examples. You will hear more in today’s hearing from both four-year and two-year institutions and state systems.

It should be noted that states and colleges often use federal innovation funds to build and expand these innovations and evidence-based models: recently, the Department of Labor’s TAACCCT grants, and Workforce Investment Fund grants have been helpful, as have the Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation (i3) and Race to the Top competitions. While the ultimate goal is institutionalization of these new approaches in state and college practice and policy, federal policy can play an important catalytic role in helping to spur postsecondary innovation and remove obstacles as well.

## Recommendations for Congress

As you consider reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, I respectfully submit the following recommendations for your consideration, with the goal of helping more low-income youth and adults obtain postsecondary credentials with value in the labor market, with particular emphasis on underprepared and non-traditional students.

### **I. Promote Innovations that Accelerate Student Progress to Quality Credentials and Outcomes**

**Provide incentives for innovation and for the expansion of evidence-based models through FIPSE, community college innovation programs, Race to the Top, or other initiatives that provide states and institutions with the resources and flexibility needed to test, develop, and take successful strategies to scale.**

Provide incentives for states and postsecondary institutions to develop policies and approaches that help accelerate student progress into and through quality programs of study to credentials, prioritizing innovations such as:

- More active advising and counseling—informed by up-to-date labor market information and student outcome data and designed to help students make good choices and persist in their chosen program
- Redesigned developmental education requirements that minimize standalone course work, accelerate enrollment in appropriate college level courses and provide adequate academic support
- Clear and efficient evidence-based on-ramps to postsecondary education pathways, including:
  - Career Pathways systems (as defined by ED, DOL, HHS) for low-skilled adults, that include the concurrent enrollment of students in adult education and postsecondary occupational coursework.
  - Proven Early College High Schools and dual and concurrent enrollment strategies to reduce remediation needs, costs to students, and time to degree completion – particularly among low-income and underrepresented students. Include incentives for work-based learning, as well as incentives for pathways through postsecondary education serving disconnected youth.
- More streamlined pathways to valued credentials: Limits on excess student credits, clear and specified transfer cores in key programs, and incentives for more rapid completion of credential requirements.

Reward colleges, or encourage states to reward colleges, that serve low-income students well, as measured by college enrollment, persistence, completion, and employment outcomes. Rewards could include funding and flexibility to innovate.

Provide incentives for employers and institutions to partner in the development and delivery of career pathways to credentials with value in the labor market.

Provide incentives to states or regional partnerships that include postsecondary institutions for developing competency-based programs of study that are not based solely on the credit hour – but that test credit for prior learning, articulation of non-credit coursework with academic credit, and provide training geared to students’ skills gaps in ways that significantly accelerate credential attainment, particularly for nontraditional, low-income and underprepared students who might need additional supports. .

Encourage and support technical assistance to and peer connections among leader institutions, states, and others to promote the rapid spread of promising and effective innovations, so that federal investments in postsecondary innovation have maximum impact in the field.

## **II. Reduce Existing Federal Policy Barriers to Innovations that Support Student Success**

**Revise financial aid policies so they encourage broad access to success innovations and remove obstacles that currently exist for non-traditional and underprepared students**

Restore Ability to Benefit (ATB). Elimination of the Ability to Benefit provision in federal student aid (eliminated in FY12 Appropriations) has devastated Career Pathways initiatives that co-enroll students in adult education and postsecondary education coursework, and added yet another barrier to success for these underprepared students. ATB allowed students without a GED or high school diploma to receive student aid once proving their “ability to benefit” through testing or successful completion of six credit hours. We thank members of the Committee for working hard to reinstate this provision through last year’s appropriation process, but it remains unresolved. HEA reauthorization or other higher education-related vehicles should reinstate this critical provision – at the very least for students in Career Pathways programs where the evidence is clear -- so that this motivated but underprepared population can access federal student aid while concurrently enrolled in a Career Pathways program and begin to accumulate credit for postsecondary coursework.

Reinstate Year-Round Pell. Another provision eliminated in FY12 Appropriations, year-round Pell is important to helping lower-skill youth and adults move more efficiently into and through postsecondary credential programs – accelerating coursetaking flexibility and pace, which will be increasingly important as institutions move towards modular coursework, stackable credentials, and programs that fit students’ schedules.

Encourage federal financial aid rules, and waivers for flexibility, that allow students to access aid for innovative accelerated pathways, including pathways that use modularized, condensed, or competency-based courses and other non-semester coursework that decrease time to completion and reduce student costs. HEA should encourage states to remove such obstacles from state aid provisions as well. Lastly, federal student aid experimental sites could test out newer innovations and more flexible forms of student aid to help students access these innovations (for example, stackable credentials, modular coursework, and early college or other credit-bearing postsecondary coursework completed in high school).

**Align federal laws related to higher education and workforce preparation—HEA, ESEA, Perkins, WIA—so that requirements (e.g. eligibility, reporting requirements, performance metrics) are not an obstacle to institution and system-level student success innovations**

The Higher Education Act and K-12 legislation can be better aligned to promote and measure student success, such as enrollment, persistence, and completion of college credentials and degrees; as well as to promote better aligned expectations of skills and supports students need to succeed in college

The Higher Education Act could also align more closely with the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the Workforce Investment Act to measure success more comparably, and to promote postsecondary success as a goal of all programs (particularly in high demand careers), given the need for today's workforce to obtain postsecondary credentials.

These federal education laws can support state and institutional efforts by placing a specific emphasis and premium on student success among underrepresented and underprepared students.