GETTING STARTED

Institutions, systems, states, and stakeholders, whether new to this work or continuing to the next phase, can align and integrate colleges' non-credit and credit programs by adopting the core principles below and following the getting started guides for implementation. The ideal for change is driven by leadership, articulating a vision and coalescing all of the relevant units to advance the integration. Yet it is also possible for enterprising change agents to embrace and advance to take the first steps toward this student-centered improvement by engaging like-minded collaborators.

CORE PRINCIPLES

A set of core principles guides the work. These principles are the foundation for developing a new way forward. They are represented in every aspect of the new framework and in the starting point case studies and examples to achieve the framework.

Be student-centric. Make students the starting point and continued focal point. Ask what is needed to best serve all students and ensure they thrive and complete. Build for equity and opportunity. Address the systems, policies, and processes that create barriers for students on this pathway. Ask whether any students are being left out or underserved. When challenging traditional structures and long held beliefs, "make sure all stakeholders understand that it is not about them, that it really is only about the students," advised Karen Burcks, Academic and Career Advisor at Prince George's Community College. At the state level, being student-centric translates into prioritizing equity in how the policies are developed and how the strategies are implemented. States also seek better ways to serve populations on the margins who have traditionally not been well-served. Being student-centric necessitates a significant cultural transformation and a commitment to a set of values that enables stakeholders to see their work and roles from a new or slightly altered perspective.

Be labor market-driven. Be attuned, through detailed labor market analysis, to the current and projected future needs of the regional and state economy. Authentically engage employers to continually validate and supplement labor market analytics. Create pathways that will respond to these needs. Educate employers on the value of these pathways. "Working with employers early on is the key to integrating non-credit and credit," stated Roy Bond, Executive Director, Workforce Operations for Dallas College, as, "employers help develop the pathway and ensure that there is higher level learning beyond the first job." Focus on high-demand and high-wage fields. Determine how to pivot to better meet economic needs. Go further in how the data is used and applied. At Monroe Community College, "we know what each program is worth in terms of both wage data for the individual and the impact of a new worker created for the economy," stated Todd Oldham, Vice President for Economic and Workforce Development and CTE. "Because of that knowledge, we've hired an education-to-employment manager to better link students to employment opportunities aligned to their training."

Build for innovation. Re-envision what is possible. Foster new opportunities utilizing leading evidence-based practices. "Be willing to blow up the model again and again and be flexible in the same way that business and industry are," recommended Larry Ferguson, President of Ashland Community and Technical College. This is where transformational leadership is essential. Be bold and act with urgency. "Disruptive innovation shocks the system. It forces you to figure things out quickly," noted Christine Barrow, Dean of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, Prince George's Community College. Be willing to think outside of traditional structures to meet existing and future demand. A few examples of this include the Ascend Institute at Dallas College, which will serve as a one-stop for employers wanting to work with the district; the new Business Solutions venture at PGCC, which will take a consultative approach to innovate and quickly respond to industry needs; and the Future of Work Center at Monroe Community College, which will provide flexible space that can be rapidly retooled for new forms of training with industry partners. For states, this is about supporting innovation at the institutional and system levels through the removal of barriers, infusion of new capacity and resources, enabling additional flexibility.

GETTING STARTED GUIDE:
STATES

1. CONNECT TO OTHER STATE PRIORITIES.

Help make this work a priority. Bring it to the attention of the governor's cabinet and state work groups. Find ways to integrate the creation of pathways across non-credit and credit programs into other governor-led initiatives related to workforce and upskilling strategies, economic recovery in the COVID era, and college attainment. Knowing that education, training, and credential attainment touches all other key areas of work across the state, facilitate more opportunities for other state initiatives and workgroups to see the relevance of this project as part of the solution. Utilize these related state efforts to gain public commitment, signaling the importance to institutions and systems.

2. CREATE THE ENABLING CONDITIONS.

States play a key role in creating the right conditions to support this work at the institutional and system level. In many of the efforts highlighted in the case studies and additional examples, work was spurred along by the action or enabling context of the state. This ranged from state higher education offices to governors to legislators.

State higher education offices are particularly well-positioned to facilitate the prioritization and implementation of key initiatives. This is achieved through communications and advocacy, which state higher education offices can employ to bring visibility and support to alignment and integration efforts, both across postsecondary institutions and systems and externally to other state leaders, such as the governor, legislature, other relevant state agencies. Such visibility promotes continued awareness and focus on the work, and is a driver to show results.

State higher education offices can also apply their convening ability to bring postsecondary leaders and other stakeholders together to discuss strategies, implementation plans, challenges to address, and opportunities to embrace. State higher education offices are similarly well-positioned to facilitate faculty and administrator learning and professional development by documenting and reporting on key steps to implementation, lessons learned, and best practices and tools for alignment and integration of non-credit and credit programs. States can highlight similar efforts happening in other states and share their approaches, progress, and outcomes with institutions and systems. Insights from national policy organizations, associations, and related entities can also be used to inform implementation.

3. DEVELOP STATEWIDE TOOLS FOR ALIGNMENT.

States can spur alignment of non-credit and credit pathways by providing tools that make it easier for institutions and systems to do this work. Develop articulation agreements or credential crosswalks for industry-based certification to credit. Work closely with colleges and faculty to determine the requirements and credit-determination for such agreements and crosswalks, as Florida does with its gold standard articulation agreement. Create systems to more easily identify and award credit for prior learning, similar to the model that Virginia Community College System has developed. Consider building statewide transfer initiatives that put standards into place for the alignment of non-credit and credit pathways, such as embedding certificates into degree programs. As these tools require annual review and update, states are well positioned to facilitate the process, rather than each institution doing it on their own. States can also help with marketing these tools to students and institutions to bring greater visibility to pathways.

4. INCENTIVIZE WITH FUNDING.

One of the surest ways to support the implementation of these strategies is with funding. Systems and institutions can be incentivized to create pathways across non-credit and credit programs by aligning it to funding. For instance, Kentucky's performance based funding system incentivized KCTCS to award certificates where they might have otherwise just awarded industry based certifications, as certificates are counted in the funding system. In Utah, SLCC was incentivized to build out its CBE non-credit programs and develop pathways to degrees through line-item funding from the state. In California, legislation in 2006 created a new category of non-credit programs called Career Development and College Preparation (CDCP) that includes workforce preparation and vocational education. CDCP programs were initially funded at 71 percent of the rate for credit programs, but later in 2014, were funded at 100 percent of the rate of credit programs, incentivizing and spurring the expansion of the CDCP non-credit programs.[15] Seek to align funding outcomes across multiple sources to better position institutions and systems to be successful in their non-credit and credit pathways work. Be mindful of how other funding sources, such as WIOA and Perkins, may have separate state performance funding outcomes and requirements that will need to be addressed.

5. PROVIDE FINANCIAL AID AND ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO STUDENTS.

Prioritize financial aid to both enable and incentivize students to move through these pathways. This could be in the form of state scholarships for students in non-credit programs to continue on to credit programs. It could be through agreements with employers to fund employees to advance their learning through continuation of these pathways. It could be through financial aid to make non-credit programs more accessible or fully covered for students in non-credit programs. Additionally, facilitate the connection of other resources and supports for adult learners or other specific populations, such as child care, housing, transportation, employment, and food assistance.

6. CHANGE POLICY TO ADDRESS BARRIERS.

Consider conducting a policy and regulation audit to identify existing barriers to the alignment and integration of non-credit and credit programs. Empower key stakeholders to address these barriers through policy and regulation change. Consider the state's role in technical components related to accreditation and program approval and how process and policy changes could further spur the seamless creation of these pathways.

7. EMPLOY LEGISLATION IF NEEDED.

While not a first course of action, legislative mandates can be effective in targeting areas or components that are out of the control of institutions and systems or that are not traditionally done at the institution and system level. Such examples come from Utah, where the legislature mandated

the merger of the state technical institution with the community college and more recently when the legislature required SLCC to eliminate all programmatic duplication across non-credit and credit programs. Legislation in Ohio created the One-Year Option, whereby Ohio Technical Centers award a block of up to 30 credits, which aligns to 49 different degree pathways. Lawmakers can also engage funding structures that hamper change or structures that support inaction, which the state higher education office is not able to achieve on their own. The key to effective legislation is ensuring all stakeholders have an opportunity to inform its development in order to avoid any unintended consequences.

8. INSTITUTE ACCOUNTABILITY.

Data collection, analysis, and reporting are essential to urge this work forward and demonstrate results. Require institutions to report on their efforts, track their progress, and show their outcomes. Recognize the significant challenges in data transparency and analysis across non-credit and credit programs. State higher education offices can work with institutions and systems to address these problems. Identify other levers for accountability, such as including non-credit credentials of value into performance based funding systems and incorporating high-quality non-credit credential attainment as a standing metric that the state higher education collects and reports.