



# TRANSITION POINTS

The Education Strategy Group Newsletter

## A Look Back at 2020

As each of us knows well, this has been a uniquely difficult year. With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, a devastating economic crisis, a nationwide reckoning for racial justice, and a contentious Presidential election, 2020 challenged each of us in significant ways. In our collective efforts to recover, we all have a part to play in putting the American Dream within reach of every American.

As we at ESG have reflected on our work in 2020 and the work to come in 2021 and beyond, we do so with a renewed resolve to ensure that each of our efforts advances equitable opportunities for economic mobility and prosperity. Building back a strong nation with a thriving economy and level playing field requires recognizing where policies, institutions, and cultural norms have harmed far too many Americans—particularly people of color and from low-income backgrounds.

In the new year, we plan to share more about the direction that our work will take over the next several years as we pursue expanded economic opportunity and mobility through increased educational attainment. Below, we take a look back at some of the challenges we confronted, partnerships we expanded, and lessons we learned during a year like nothing any of us can remember.

I wish you and your loved ones a safe, healthy, and restorative holiday season and a happy new year.

**Matt Gandal**

*President & CEO, Education Strategy Group*

## Responding to the Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic crisis took hold, we worked in connection with our partners to offer analysis, strategies, and solutions to our colleagues in the field as they dealt with unprecedented challenges.



- Our [Accelerate Recovery](#) blog series explored key areas for leadership to prioritize in their efforts to accelerate recovery for our country and our hardest-hit populations.
- The [Making A Comeback](#) webinar series, presented with SHEEO and ACCT, was designed to help state and institutional leaders anticipate and respond to challenges facing higher education due to the pandemic.
- [Pivot to Recover: State Postsecondary Attainment Agendas in the Era of COVID-19](#)

examined how states are adapting and innovating on their existing efforts to increase higher education attainment to accelerate economic recovery.

- As part of ECS' *Equitable Transitions Through Pandemic Disruptions* series, ESG's [Establishing a State-Level Postsecondary Advising Network](#) brief outlined ways in which “near peer” advisors can help ease the transition and steer students toward success.

## Setting Ambitious Postsecondary Attainment Goals

ESG believes that commitments to ambitious postsecondary attainment goals are critical to moving the needle on credential attainment and economic mobility. This year, we continued our work with leaders at the state and regional levels, pivoting with them to make their attainment agendas central to economic recovery.

- In partnership with SHEEO, we helped cross-sector teams from seven states [develop ambitious plans](#) to meet their attainment goals, particularly through the pandemic.
- ESG supported [Detroit Drives Degrees](#), a collaborative effort to increase postsecondary degrees and credentials in the Detroit region, in the development of a strategic plan, which was unveiled at a [virtual launch event](#) this fall.
- [The Equitable Outcomes Imperative: Strategies for Advancing Racial Equity in Postsecondary Attainment](#) discussed ways in which states can put equity at the forefront of their attainment efforts, including by setting specific and ambitious equity goals.

## Accelerating Successful Postsecondary Transitions

This year, the impact of COVID-19 resulted in a devastating 21.7 percent drop in students who enrolled in college directly after high school graduation. A high school diploma is no longer the ticket to economic opportunity it once was; now more than ever, states, districts, and schools must track key data to target effective interventions and supports to help students to and through higher education. We're pleased to see the [new federal stimulus package](#) include FAFSA simplification and the expansion of Pell Grant eligibility to help more students have access to and succeed in college.



- We published [Fast Track FAFSA Completion](#), a report that analyzed state and local policies and practices and provided clear steps for states and communities to ensure that the FAFSA is a springboard, not a barrier, to postsecondary access and success. A set of five [case studies](#) illustrated the Fast Track FAFSA strategies in action across the country.
- [From Tails to Heads: Building Momentum for Postsecondary Success](#) offered a framework for a new set of postsecondary transition metrics-known as “Momentum Metrics”- for states and communities to prioritize in order to increase successful postsecondary transitions. Accompanying pieces were published in [The 74 Million](#) and on The Fordham Institute's

[Flypaper blog](#).

- In Minnesota, ESG supported the P-20 Education Partnership in identifying a set of equity-driven priorities for collective action to meet the state's postsecondary attainment goal, with a particular focus on smoothing the transitions between high school and postsecondary.

## Developing High-Quality Pathways and Student Experiences

The pandemic has already had a disparate impact on students of color and from low-income families, and is likely to worsen existing educational and economic inequities. All students deserve equitable access to high-quality courses, experiences, and pathways to prepare them for success in the world of work - particularly as we face a shifting economy.



- JPMorgan Chase [announced](#) new five-year career readiness investments in six U.S. cities as part of the firm's New Skills at Work initiative to prepare people for the future of work. In our role as lead partner, alongside AdvanceCTE, ESG [began providing](#) coaching and technical assistance to the six sites and working with them to conduct in-depth equity analyses of their existing programming.
- With the generous support of the Joyce Foundation, ESG launched the Work-Based Learning Intermediary Institute, which brought together cross-sector teams from five communities across the country to build capacity of [intermediary organizations](#) to strengthen and expand work-based learning opportunities.
- ESG partnered with the Dana Center on the [Launch Years Initiative](#) to provide direct assistance to Washington, Texas, and Georgia in their work to reimagine high school mathematics pathways for students. The initiative also released the *Launch Years: A New Vision for the Transition from High School to Postsecondary Mathematics* report, which identifies barriers and critical recommendations.
- In Ohio, ESG supported the state's cross-sector effort to expand high school mathematics course offerings beyond Algebra II to better serve students' academic and career interests.

## Ensuring the Value of Credentials

A high school diploma is no longer enough for long-term economic success, a trend cemented by the pandemic. To open doors to in-demand career opportunities with family-sustaining wages it takes a credential aligned with labor market demand. As they look toward economic recovery, states and institutions have a responsibility to identify and communicate the credentials that are of greatest value to employers.

- ESG supported six states in defining and identifying high-value non-degree credentials through our Credentials of Value Institute and expanded our partnership with Lumina Foundation to support additional states in understanding value indicators within quality shorter-term credentials through a series of webinars that were co-hosted with the National Skills Coalition: [Aligning Non-Degree Credentials with Economic Recovery](#); [Examining Equity within Non-Degree Credentials](#); and [Building Pathways with Stackable Non-Degree](#)

### Credentials.

- We were proud to partner with Hawai'i P-20 Partnerships for Education, Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i, Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, and Kamehameha Schools on the [Promising Credentials project](#), an initiative aimed at identifying high value certificates and credentials using Hawai'i labor market data and local employer insights.

## Supporting All Postsecondary Learners

The increasing importance of postsecondary credentials for economic opportunity and success requires leaders in states and systems to ensure they are serving the needs of all learners. Expanded Pell Grant eligibility, including to incarcerated individuals, is a promising start to improving postsecondary access. Institutions and policymakers can take a number of additional critical actions to ensure that all can succeed in higher education.



- In October, ESG released [A More Unified Community College: Strategies and Resources to Align Non-Credit and Credit Programs](#), a compilation of research, strategies, and examples of success in the field to support community colleges in pursuit of more equitable student experiences and outcomes.
- Millions of individuals who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic will be looking to reskill as they seek to get back to work. This fall, with the generous support of Ascendium Education Group and The Kresge Foundation, we launched the [Accelerating Recovery through Credentials \(ARC\)](#) effort, which will result in a scalable policy and practice framework with accompanying guides that will help higher education institutions become career transition hubs that are responsive to the needs of adults.

## Giving Back to Our Communities

The ESG team hails from states and cities across the country. During this challenging year, our team committed to doing our part to give back and strengthen our local communities. Our staff supported local and national food banks, donated time and resources to combat homelessness, sponsored holiday food and gifts for local families in need, mentored high school students, conducted mock job interviews for military veterans, and more. This season of giving is particularly important this year, and our team is committed to continuing to support and strengthen our communities.

From our entire team, happy holidays and best wishes for a healthy and successful new year.



*Education Strategy Group is a mission-driven consulting firm that works with K-12, higher education, and workforce leaders to achieve greater impact. We work across sectors to move the needle on issues that are critical to improving student success and advancing equity.*

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