

PIVOT TO RECOVER

State Postsecondary Attainment Agendas in the Era of COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

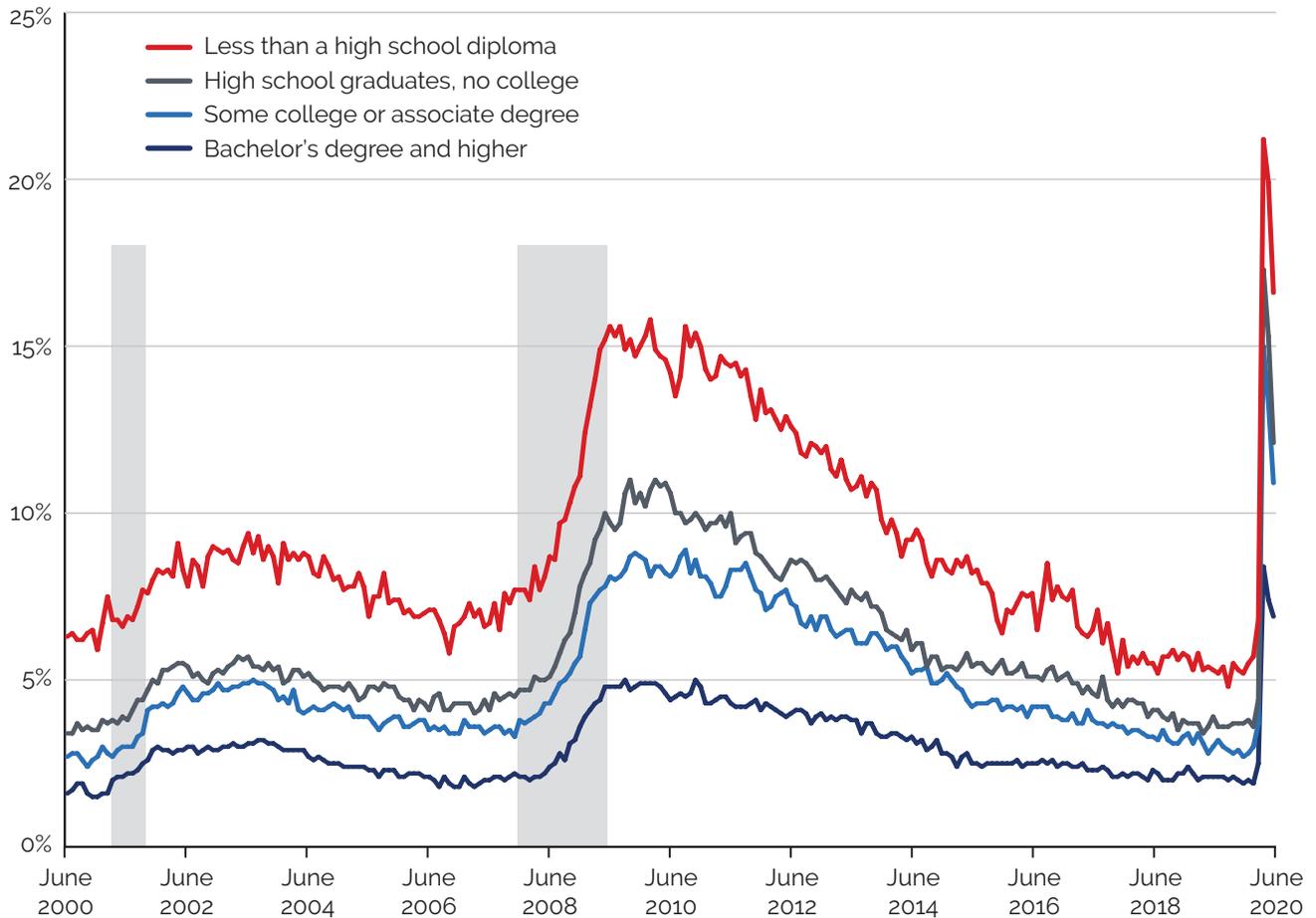
In the span of one month, 20 million Americans lost their jobs due to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. More than 60 percent of Americans are worried about losing their jobs (Strada Education Network, 2020). Whole industries have collapsed, been shuttered, or shifted dramatically. The hospitality and food industries have significantly slowed, with 82 percent of employers in this industry having closed at least some aspect of their business (SHRM, 2020). Other industries, such as some aspects of health care, certain sectors in manufacturing, telecommunications, and online retail, have faced increased demand.

Low-skilled individuals and those without any postsecondary credentials are particularly vulnerable to economic shifts and are limited in options for employment. As of June 2020, the difference between unemployment rates among different levels of educational attainment was stark; the unemployment rate for those with just a high school diploma was 11.9 percent compared to 7 percent for those with a bachelor's degree.

A skilled workforce is needed not only for recovery, but for a healthy economy. Right now, only 20 percent of low-skill adults participate in training or reskilling, compared to nearly 60 percent of high-skill adults (OECD, 2020). This trend needs to change. In the COVID-19 era; immediate and accelerated upskilling relevant to labor demand is critical. Attainment strategies as part of a larger agenda are the timely solution for mass upskilling during the recovery.

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Unemployment Rates for Persons 25 Years and Older by Educational Attainment, Seasonally Adjusted



Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Many individuals will look to postsecondary education and training options for a path forward. Currently, 34 percent of Americans view additional education as their best option to find a job (Strada Education Network, 2020). Disadvantaged and vulnerable populations may have the greatest need for reskilling, upskilling, and education, as the economic crisis disproportionately affected the economic prospects of certain groups. During the pandemic, Black Americans were most likely to be laid off (25 percent compared to a national average of 18 percent), and Latino Americans were most likely to have lost income (66 percent compared to a national average of 54 percent) (Strada Education Network, 2020). However, for many of these individuals, relevant training or credential programs are difficult to access and successfully complete. The current environment creates a stronger imperative to remove existing barriers on the path to attainment for all students.

The drivers to achieve increased attainment outcomes have become even more important. Increasingly, employers report needing more talent with skills signaled by postsecondary credentials but experience a gap in finding that talent (SHRM, 2019). The recovery provides a critical opportunity for advancing attainment to satisfy the increasing need for a robust, skilled workforce. The equation is simple, but powerful: increase the attainment of postsecondary skills and credentials of the unemployed and underemployed in order to satisfy the needs of employers and advance recovery.

The importance of building a skilled workforce in the recovery provides the opportunity for states to see threads of cross-sector connectivity and build on existing structures, efforts, and metrics most relevant now and in the future. State postsecondary leaders must take action to reach populations in greatest need of training and employment and rethink how best to prepare learners and workers for the in-demand roles of the recovering economy.

ESG and SHEEO's Attainment Academy

With generous support from the ECMC Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Lumina Foundation, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) and Education Strategy Group (ESG) have brought together state leaders from seven states (CA, IN, LA, MI, NC, NJ, TN) to participate in an 18-month, multistate academy focused on postsecondary credential attainment. Through the **Attainment Academy**, states that have set ambitious postsecondary attainment goals will develop stronger plans for meeting those goals and for building the necessary buy-in and support for the goals among key policy leaders and stakeholders. All states have convened cross-sector teams made up of leaders from higher education, workforce development, K-12 education, governor's offices, and state legislatures are coming together for three cross-state meetings to share progress on concrete strategies to advance postsecondary attainment in their states.

Since the initiative began in summer 2019, the goals of the Academy have shifted to be more COVID-19 responsive, providing an outlet for states to cross-pollinate on strategies to abate and recover from the crisis. Many of the examples in this brief highlight the thoughtful ways Academy states and others are pivoting their efforts to be more responsive to COVID-19.

THE WAY FORWARD

A response to the COVID-19 crisis must include a conviction to move forward quickly, but with sustained intention and effort. In the short term, postsecondary leaders need to focus on the most immediate workforce needs and the most affected populations. These efforts should be grounded in the rationale of the existing attainment agenda yet adapted to the current situation. States and postsecondary institutions must bring about the vision, capability, and infrastructure to enable a short-term targeted response. Such planning lays the groundwork for longer-term action and strategic direction. **States can start in three ways:**

- 1. Advance recovery by promoting attainment of postsecondary credentials aligned with workforce demand;**
- 2. Immediately realign attainment priorities to address worker displacement and inequities; and**
- 3. Leverage cross-sector recovery responses to drive systemic implementation.**

Advance recovery by promoting attainment of postsecondary credentials aligned with workforce demand.

Now is not the time to set aside state attainment agendas that existed prior to the pandemic. Rather, attainment should be leveraged as a strategic opportunity for growth and expansion through workforce-aligned talent development. While the context has dramatically changed from the pre-COVID-19 environment, the goal of a robust, skilled workforce to meet the demands of today's world has not. Principles undergirding the rationale to advance the attainment agenda, such as enhancing workforce alignment to ensure a vibrant economy and articulating clear pathways to credentials with labor market value, remain the same. A renewed focus on skilled workers with credentials ready to engage in the workforce will pay large dividends as the economy recovers. Securing and leveraging federal or state funding to implement initiatives remains constant but is likely even more critical in a time of constrained budgets. Connecting the attainment agenda to other COVID-19-related efforts across the state, and strategically braiding funding will magnify impact on all fronts and accelerate recovery.

Attainment should be leveraged as a **strategic opportunity for growth and expansion** through workforce-aligned talent development.

In this rapidly changing economic environment, states must continue work to establish and maintain alignment between postsecondary and the demands of the labor market. Regular and recurring analyses of and reactions to current labor market data is crucial. Prior to COVID-19, states and institutions had become increasingly

savvy in identifying labor market trends and using the data to shape their programs, offerings, and approach to working with industry. Much or all of that data is now void. For instance, O*Net “bright outlook occupations,” which are occupations expected to grow rapidly in the next several years or have large numbers of job openings, still include jobs like first-line supervisors of retail salespersons and food preparation/serving workers. States need to quickly assess current labor market needs using the best available data and project ahead according to the latest trends. These efforts need to occur at the local, regional, and state level and should continue in regular intervals as the economy goes through various stages of pandemic recovery and response. **Indiana's Rapid Recovery effort includes weekly reports on state and national labor market data, allowing consumers to follow the trends in real time. Using these data, institutions like Ivy Tech Community College are identifying emerging priority fields and associated credentials to match returning adults with promising pathways back to employment.**

Recovery efforts must also address high-quality pathways development, as employers will need skilled talent to fill vacancies in the new economy. Based on the outcomes of the labor market assessment, states and institutions should prioritize programs and offerings that most immediately respond to economic and industry needs and that put students on a path to high-demand, high-wage jobs. Understanding the non-degree credential landscape was a priority to many states before COVID-19 and remains central to the agenda moving forward.

Indiana's Comprehensive Response

During the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, Indiana's unemployment rate jumped to 14.7 percent, with over 20 million jobs lost in the month of April alone. The impact across all sectors was widespread and significant. In response, Indiana launched **Rapid Recovery for a Better Future**, an initiative to help Hoosiers get back on track, and gain the education and skills they will need in the economic recovery. Indiana leveraged support from the Governor and \$50 million of CARES Act funds to mobilize the state around key necessities for recovery:



- **REAL-TIME DATA.** Using weekly reports on labor market data, Indiana is identifying in-demand fields and aligning credentials for students to secure employment in those fields.
- **A FOCUS ON DISPLACED ADULT WORKERS.** Indiana rebooted an existing program to target unemployed adults, providing the tools they need to return to higher education.
- **CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION.** Indiana's Governor's Workforce Cabinet brings together the collective thought of workforce, postsecondary, and industry representatives to aid in the recovery and address the most pressing issues of the displaced workforce.

Implementing these strategies has had an immense impact on the state. The Rapid Recovery effort in Indiana exemplifies attainment as a recovery strategy.

States are making this approach possible. **In Florida, the Governor and Department of Education recently revealed plans to allocate \$35 million from the CARES Act into rapid credentialing—18-week or less programs for in-demand technical and industry certifications in the state that articulate into college credit.** The immediate focus is and should be on quickly developing on-ramps and pathways to get the most affected workers and populations through training and education. Yet not all short-term credentials are equal. State must take care to balance the need for people to complete a credential quickly to get back to work and ensuring those credentials lead to good jobs with family-sustaining wages. Some important strategies to address this issue include development of pathways that are accelerated and make use of work-based learning, apprenticeships, stackable credentials, and industry-based credentials. Facilitating connections from training and education pathways to job placement will help more individuals return to work faster.



Immediately realign attainment priorities to address worker displacement and inequities.

While recovery efforts are core to the attainment agenda, not all attainment priorities from before the onset of COVID-19 can or should move forward during recovery. Leadership need to apply the lens of the current economic crisis to existing efforts, considering the greatest needs by population, region, and sector. Attainment and recovery strategies must be explicit in their commitment to supporting the education and economic needs of low-income, low-skilled, and underrepresented groups; most importantly, those that are now newly unemployed as a result of the pandemic. These are the populations who need the most assistance with upskilling or new training. Employing equity-minded attainment strategies not only mitigate the negative impact of the economic crisis on individuals most impacted but also provide a way to close equity gaps that have widened during this time.

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State, system, and institutional leaders must act boldly and in reliance on evidence-based strategies such as dual enrollment. **Louisiana promoted broader and more equitable access to dual enrollment by reducing barriers to participation. Recognizing that disruptions in the spring semester may have limited students' abilities to complete the standardized testing requirements necessary to demonstrate college readiness and meet minimum admissions eligibility**

criteria, the Louisiana Board of Regents adjusted eligibility criteria for prospective students to include a minimum cumulative 2.5 high school GPA and subject-specific demonstration of readiness either through an assessment or counselor recommendation. Additionally, Northern Virginia Community College leveraged CARES Act dollars to target marginalized student populations in offering **free dual enrollment** courses that provide visible on-ramps to in-demand career pathways.

In the recovery, top attainment priorities will include providing education and training at reduced cost and in an accelerated fashion, tailored to industry and community demands. States and institutions need to dramatically streamline the application and payment process to get more workers trained and back into the workforce. They must determine what is essential for a quick admission process and explore alternative means of funding and scholarships. Such efforts require statewide buy-in and funding to accomplish. **Louisiana is also committing financial support for adult learners through an expansion of Complete Louisiana, an initiative to encourage adults who have not completed their degree to return to school. This May, the University System of Louisiana announced a 45 percent tuition decrease for those in the program as an effort to support and keep students engaged through the crisis.** Finding ways to incentivize both students and industry partners to ensure completion benefits both individuals and the economy as a whole. **In addition, Virginia allocated a portion of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief fund to support last-dollar scholarships for displaced adults who enroll in stackable credential programs leading to jobs in target industry sectors. Additionally, the Mississippi State Workforce Investment Board recommended using \$25 million in CARES Act funds to incentivize employers to hire new employees and offer on-the-job training.**

In anticipation of the likely influx of adult learners, state leaders must be sensitive to adult learners' need for support along the way, identifying and removing as many of the known barriers as possible and ramping up lines of support to facilitate learner progression. Statewide initiatives like Tennessee's TNReconnect have long been a model for other states looking to better serve students over the age of 25. Presently, TNReconnect offers both financial and advising support to adults looking to start, finish, or pursue an additional postsecondary credential at a Tennessee community college or technical college. **In the wake of COVID-19, the state is redoubling its efforts on TNReconnect to develop a strategy for "Reconnect Colleges."** This designation will be given to four-year universities in the state that have demonstrated unique capacity to serve adult learners and adults will be advised to pursue their baccalaureate education at those institutions. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission will be partnering with Middle Tennessee State University and University of Memphis to act as peer mentors for other universities looking to improve their supports and services for adult learners.



Other states, like California, are providing online support for displaced workers looking for jobs through [OnwardCA.org](https://www.onwardca.org), a one-stop resource for Californians experiencing job loss due to the pandemic. This resource helps link education, career, and other supports to help address immediate needs. To specifically address the needs of displaced workers looking to access additional training and credentials, efforts can be based on existing models of how to accelerate programs through credit for prior learning, competency-based instruction, and work-based learning, and how

to work more closely with industry on skills training and job placement or matching. **As part of their Rapid Recovery effort, Indiana leveraged an existing program launched in 2016 by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, [You Can. Go Back.](#), to specifically target unemployed adults with some college, but no degree.**

Relatedly, data collection and analysis under the attainment agenda has had a growing emphasis on equity, the identification of gaps, and visibility of specific populations through disaggregated data collection and the selection of key metrics that give insight into progress and barriers. During and following recovery, leaders need to identify metrics that focus on priority populations and show not only attainment, but access and outcomes. When developing a data strategy, it is critically important to set high standards for data transparency, accountability for progress, and quality assurance; commit to swift changes when and where needed to support priority populations; and consider how to leverage data to support those deeply impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. **New Jersey is using their labor market information to target outreach and messaging for displaced adults, focusing their communications on a given credential's return in the labor market.**



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Leverage cross-sector recovery responses to drive systemic implementation.

Many states have developed cross-sector task forces to focus and align the state's economic recovery. Since higher education is a key partner in many of these efforts, aligning recovery-related attainment efforts should be a top priority of postsecondary systems and institutions. Such groups allow leaders to focus their energy and ensure a coordinated, targeted, thoughtful, and timely response to the greatest issues at hand. These groups allow for the quick identification of new and innovative solutions, along with the adoption of existing evidence-based practices that can close gaps, serve students, and streamline workers into the workforce. Most importantly, these efforts can leverage existing initiatives and address cross-system barriers to implementation. **Indiana's Governor's Workforce Cabinet is a cross-sector group that existed pre-pandemic but has become the state's hub for recovery efforts. This body developed and is responsible for implementing Indiana's Rapid Recovery Plan, which coordinates workforce, postsecondary, employer, and CARES Act resources to address the multiple and immediate needs of the state's displaced workforce.**

Because of the importance of credential attainment to recovery efforts, postsecondary leaders should examine strategic opportunities to advance attainment goals and to translate plans into action and leverage multiple funding sources. Putting attainment front and center in these efforts will provide opportunities to more robustly engage key stakeholders to support planning and implementation of strategies that advance postsecondary skill and credential attainment. Cohesive cross-sector efforts build a stronger case for recovery strategies centered on attainment to legislators, policymakers, and other external and internal stakeholders. **For example, the Governor of New Jersey established a Restart and Recovery Advisory Council and named co-chairs that are authoritative state leads in postsecondary education and economic development. The Council focuses on the short-term restart of the state's economy, while considering how to position the economy for recovery long-term. In addition, the state has committed to advisory groups by industry sector to keep the momentum going on workforce alignment, prioritizing and supporting groups of New Jerseyans hit the hardest during the pandemic.**

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Cross-sector responses to the pandemic appear to be most effective when they create implementation plans that focus on collective action. Collective action covers both sector and place, and it must take into account the efforts and needs across not only sectors, but geographical regions. To do this, recovery strategies should be developed in conjunction with institutions, employers, and relevant state and local agencies, creating a sense of ownership that is strong across all sectors. Each stakeholder group must have both a role in implementation and a responsibility for the success of the outcomes. Collective action requires active and ongoing coordination to ensure the most vulnerable learner populations are effectively supported between transitions from onboarding to education and employment.

The Way Forward: Questions for State and Higher Education Leaders

States and higher education leaders are starting in different places to address the urgent reskilling and attainment needs emerging as a result of the pandemic. This work is complex and multi-faceted and requires significant cross-system efforts. At a minimum, states and systems should consider:

- What do workforce and real-time data say about hardest hit sectors? What do data suggest about likely growth sectors?
- Which credentials are most likely to lead to high-wage, high-growth jobs? What is the mix of bachelor's, associate's, certificates, and certifications? Are there regional differences?
- What opportunities have you put in place to help displaced workers from those sectors transition to a new career? How do you recognize their workplace experience?
- Which populations have experienced the most significant displacement? How are you developing responses to address their immediate needs and prioritizing them in your funding streams?
- How will you address widening equity gaps in education systems and work as a result of disproportionate impact of the pandemic?
- How are you aligning different parts of your workforce and education systems, including metrics, accountability, and funding, to more effectively serve displaced workers?

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The work of recovery from the pandemic will be iterative; many uncertainties remain in this early stage. State and postsecondary leaders should find ways to leverage available federal and philanthropic resources. In addition, leaders should expect continuing shifts in needs and circumstances, and structure priorities and programmatic offerings, while remaining flexible and responsive to new trends, gaps, and context.

Strategies for increasing postsecondary attainment are relevant in this time of immediate crisis, but also for long-term recovery efforts. While short-term efforts and planning are underway, state leaders should set up a structure to begin to move toward a longer-term plan that will address the current crisis and significantly advance the work of higher education. Now is the time for bold action to reinvent systems and structures to better serve all students. State and postsecondary leaders can make the case for change, capitalize on the willingness of stakeholders to innovate in a time of crisis, and engage the full community in moving forward to better serve students and the economy.

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