State Opportunity Index

Connecting education with opportunity

strada
EDUCATION FOUNDATION

2025

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Table of Contents

Foreword

By Stephen Moret

> "Until quite recently, the rewards of higher education were overwhelmingly clear: college graduates got better jobs, earned more money and had almost unchallenged access to political power and social prestige. In short, a college diploma was seen as a necessary ticket for the journey through American life … A recent poll conducted for Citibank found that nearly 80 percent of middle-class parents want to send their children to college. But for a variety of reasons, many of these same parents are beginning to worry that college may be a commitment they simply cannot afford to make. They are concerned about soaring costs, which put enormous strain on all but the fattest family budgets. They fear that current college curriculums … may not be providing their sons and daughters with the kinds of education they need. They also worry whether their children will find themselves well prepared for the world of work after graduation."

That passage appeared not last year, but in a 1976 *Newsweek* cover story entitled "Who Needs College?" Five decades later, those concerns sound strikingly familiar. Families still wrestle with whether the cost of college will deliver on a core promise: the opportunity for a better and more secure life.

Americans have long held fast to the idea that education is the most reliable pathway to opportunity. Since World War II, American higher education has evolved through two national movements: first, the access era, with landmark policies such as the GI Bill and Higher Education Act; and second, the completion era, with state leaders across the country adopting higher educational attainment goals.

But access and completion, while valuable, have not been enough to consistently deliver on the promise of postsecondary education as a pathway to opportunity. We're now entering a third era: success beyond completion, with a sharper focus on helping people land jobs that pay well and offer growth opportunities.

By bringing together research-backed strategies for improving outcomes and benchmarking measures to track progress across all 50 states, the State Opportunity Index offers a framework to help policymakers, higher education system leaders, and institutions strengthen outcomes beyond completion. At its core, the Index emphasizes one simple but powerful expectation: that education beyond high school should, at minimum, provide a positive return on investment for learners. While education's value extends far beyond earnings, this is the baseline every student deserves.

The State Opportunity Index describes five keys to achieving this goal:

- **Clear Outcomes** – providing accurate information on career and earnings outcomes so learners can make well-informed choices
- **Quality Coaching** – offering personalized guidance and support so learners can navigate education and career pathways with confidence
- **Affordability** – making sure cost is never an insurmountable barrier to opportunity
- **Work-Based Learning** – expanding opportunities for paid internships, apprenticeships, and other experiences that connect education to career
- **Employer Alignment** – broadening access to programs that lead to quality jobs and mobility

Taken together, these five commitments represent a new compact for opportunity in America — one grounded in outcomes that matter for learners and families. At the same time, these commitments will strengthen talent pipelines for employers, positioning them and their communities, regions, and states to grow and thrive.

Informed by data from 50 states plus the District of Columbia, the State Opportunity Index shows where and how progress is being made and identifies those areas where more work is needed.

If we get this right, here's what the future could look like: A young person or working adult explores their options with the help of a career coach who provides support at key points along the way. They have clear and timely information about the career paths and earnings outcomes of different programs — whether a certificate, an industry certification, an apprenticeship, a degree, or a combination of credentials. They know the cost of every program, how to pay for it, and that every public option is affordable and accessible. During their postsecondary education journey, they engage in paid work-based learning that sharpens their skills and helps clarify their career interests. By completion, they don't just hold a credential (or a few); they have a good job, a resume with meaningful experience, and momentum toward a better future.

Central to America's progress will be the work of state leaders across the country who establish state higher education goals, design accountability systems, and appropriate funding to support the essential work that public institutions do every day.

Every state across the country is making progress in connecting education to opportunity. None believe they are moving fast enough, but that determination is itself a sign of ambition. The State Opportunity Index is intended as a resource to help us learn from one another, accelerate progress, and ensure that postsecondary education delivers on its promise of opportunity for all.

We see the State Opportunity Index not as a perfect, finished product but rather a work in progress that continues to evolve as we learn more and receive feedback from policymakers, educators, learners, employers, scholars, and other partners. What we believe most strongly is that postsecondary education in America should represent a pathway to opportunity for everyone, especially those facing the greatest challenges, and that we should all continue the work required to make this aspiration a reality.

If you have feedback on the State Opportunity Index or ideas for how its usefulness could be strengthened, please reach out, as we would love to hear from you.

In the meantime, let's redouble our efforts to strengthen the connection between education and opportunity, so we can ensure that 50 years from now, *Newsweek* doesn't publish another story about college that could have been written today.

5

CONNECTING EDUCATION WITH OPPORTUNITY

Five Keys to Success

Postsecondary education offers one of the surest pathways to opportunity in America, but it too often falls short, even for those who finish. Too many learners invest substantial time and money without experiencing a positive return on investment (ROI). Policymakers and institutional leaders can greatly improve employment outcomes for learners by adopting the five keys to success described on the next page. These measures, each supported by research, would also strengthen talent pipelines for employers and fuel growth in regions and states, delivering benefits for learners, employers, and communities alike.

	Illustrative Benefits for Learners	Illustrative Benefits for Employers
Clear Outcomes **VISION //** Everyone has access to accurate information on employment outcomes that can help them make informed decisions about postsecondary education.	✓ Universal visibility into earnings, career outcomes, and ROI of every program ✓ Greater confidence in selecting an institution and program aligned with their goals	✓ Enhanced insights into which programs prepare learners for success in relevant jobs ✓ Increased responsiveness of policymakers and institutions through visibility into regional supply/demand gaps
Quality Coaching **VISION //** Everyone has access to education-to-career coaching that helps them reflect on their talents and interests, choose a career goal, map pathways through education, and navigate challenges.	✓ Higher satisfaction with first post-graduation job ✓ Improved likelihood of securing a college-level job ✓ Greater satisfaction with early career progress	✓ Access to better-prepared and more diverse talent pipelines ✓ Potential for improved retention through stronger alignment of interests with real-world career paths
Affordability **VISION //** A quality education is within everyone's reach. The cost of education is not an insurmountable obstacle for students.	✓ Increased access to postsecondary education and related opportunities, especially for first-generation and low-income learners ✓ Lower debt burdens for low- and middle-income learners	✓ Larger, more diverse, and better-prepared talent pipelines ✓ Reduced employee financial stress, supporting stronger performance and retention
Work-Based Learning **VISION //** All learners have access to work-based learning experiences, including paid internships and apprenticeships, that help connect their education to their career aspirations.	✓ Higher earnings, improved likelihood of securing a college-level job, and more job offers ✓ Greater job satisfaction in early career	✓ Easier, lower-cost access to more robust talent pipelines ✓ More opportunities to develop and assess candidates before making a permanent hiring decision
Employer Alignment **VISION //** All students have access to programs that lead to quality jobs and mobility. Employers assess and advance individuals based on skills and experiences, not only degrees.	✓ Greater access to programs that lead to strong earnings and improved likelihood of securing a college-level job ✓ More opportunities to secure good jobs in the region and/or state of their postsecondary institution	✓ More robust supply of talent to fill high-wage jobs that are in high demand ✓ Higher match rates between the skills of graduates and employer talent requirements

Introduction

An investment in postsecondary education represents a consequential decision that can greatly impact the trajectory of an individual's life. The time and resources needed to complete a college degree or other postsecondary education program (e.g., a certificate or apprenticeship) are significant, and learners justifiably expect that their investment in additional education will lead to opportunities that improve their life, both financially and personally. At the same time, employers have expectations for the individuals they recruit and hire. They are looking for individuals with the skills and experience required to succeed in in-demand jobs.

Ideally, the goals and expectations of learners, would-be job seekers, educators, and employers connect in ways that expand access to programs leading to quality jobs and economic mobility. Education and employment systems that are connected, transparent, and mutually supportive benefit everyone, including learners, employers, and regional economies. Unfortunately, that is often not the case.

Introduced in 2024, the State Opportunity Index helps states measure how well postsecondary education and employment systems connect to support pathways to opportunity for individuals and talent pipelines for employers. While meaningful progress has been made since the inaugural 2024 report, the 2025 findings show that too many individuals are still struggling to see the way ahead to an affordable education and meaningful career, while too many good jobs are still going unfilled.

The Index measures areas of impact at both the student and the system levels, making the data and findings useful to a broad range of stakeholders. At a time when the value of college is increasingly being scrutinized, this comprehensive set of measures is uniquely positioned to both inform and support efforts to improve postsecondary outcomes.

Building on last year's report, this year's State Opportunity Index includes an even broader range of data and findings across five focus areas: Clear Outcomes, Quality Coaching, Affordability, Work-Based Learning, and Employer Alignment. For each of these areas, and for every state and nationally, the Index categorizes progress at one of four levels: Leading, Advanced, Developing, or Foundational.

For the strong majority of states, sufficient data are available this year to provide a category placement for all five focus areas.

- **Leading:** State is at the forefront, demonstrating strong progress
- **Advanced:** State has made substantial progress
- **Developing:** State is in the early stages of improvement
- **Foundational:** State is just beginning its journey

The State Opportunity Index also estimates the percentage of public college graduates in each state likely to experience a positive return on their investment (ROI) within 10 years. This year's national finding shows that 70 percent of recent public college graduates can expect to experience a positive ROI, including 73 percent of bachelor's degree graduates and 60 percent of associate degree graduates. The positive ROI calculation varies substantially by state, from a low of 53 percent to a high of 82 percent. Since postsecondary education should offer a pathway to greater opportunity for 100 percent of students, the state-by-state calculation of positive ROI is particularly useful to state leaders because it allows them to see their own progress toward that goal, as well as learn from their peers in other states.

Since leaders across states are often eager to learn from one another, this year's report also includes 10 "States in Action" profiles that demonstrate how some states are driving progress across the five focus areas. At a time when limited resources make this hard work even more challenging, peer-to-peer sharing can provide forward-looking state leaders an opportunity to draw ideas and inspiration from the progress of others.

Among the major findings in this year's report, many states have made substantial progress:

Clear Outcomes
States with robust data systems have better information about the career outcomes of their graduates and can use that information to prioritize state investments and help learners make well-informed choices. Thirty-seven states are now Advanced or Leading in their data infrastructure, up from 22 last year. Leading states include Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia.

Quality Coaching
Graduates who have received timely information on education-to-career pathways and support to make an education-to-career plan are more likely to secure a college-level job. Public institutions in most states are strong in providing support to their students in making a plan and overcoming barriers; however, very few students report that they received labor market information, such as potential jobs or earnings, early in their education journey when it's most helpful.

Affordability
Even at public institutions, cost remains one of the top barriers for learners to access and complete a college degree. While community colleges are usually affordable, four-year institutions often are not. Just one state (Florida) is leading in Affordability for four-year institutions, while 45 states are Leading (35) or Advanced (10) for two-year institutions.

Work-Based Learning
Paid work-based learning experiences are tied to higher post-completion earnings and stronger likelihood that a graduate's first job requires a college degree. Participation in quality work-based learning is increasing. Forty-three percent of students at public four-year institutions participated in a paid work-based learning experience, with Pennsylvania and Iowa leading the way.

Employer Alignment
For postsecondary education to deliver opportunity, learners need access to programs leading to high-wage, high-demand jobs, and employers need reliable pipelines of

qualified graduates. Yet many graduates struggle to secure college-level jobs, while many high-wage jobs go unfilled. Employer Alignment remains a major national challenge: no states are Leading, and only three (California, Rhode Island, and Utah) are Advanced.

Despite their efforts to improve across the focus areas, states are still at the Foundational or Developing stage in some areas. For example, few students report receiving early information on potential career paths and earnings for their field of study, and many students are not paid for work-based learning — especially clinicals, student teaching, and practica. And while most community colleges are affordable for students, this year's findings show that four-year institutions are still unaffordable for many students in many states. Overall, too few students are completing their education on time, and a substantial share of graduates are not securing college-level jobs or earning enough to pay back their student loans in the decade after graduating.

This year's State Opportunity Index reinforces that although states are playing a leadership role in the movement to advance post-college outcomes, there are still many institutions and states that don't have the policies and practices in place or the infrastructure they need to connect education with opportunity. By continuing to make progress across the five focus areas, and by working in partnership with education leaders, employers, and other important stakeholders, state leaders can help more graduates experience a positive return on investment and better connect education with opportunity for all learners.

Return on Investment

Key Takeaways

- Nationwide, 70 percent of recent public college graduates can expect to experience a positive return on investment (ROI) within a decade of graduation.
- The national figure includes 73 percent of bachelor's degree graduates and 60 percent of associate degree graduates.
- At the four-year level, a positive ROI ranges across states from 82 percent to 56 percent of graduates.
- At the two-year level, a positive ROI ranges across states from 76 percent to 41 percent of graduates.

While postsecondary education has long been one of America's most reliable pathways to opportunity, the path from education to employment is more complicated today, and a degree no longer guarantees economic success. Research shows that postsecondary education is most economically worthwhile when individuals acquire skills and experience that are valued in the labor market. For this reason, we estimate ROI not in terms of dollars but people: the percentage of associate and bachelor's degree graduates in each state for whom college is likely to pay off.

Estimating the portion of graduates with a positive ROI is not intended to suggest that the value of postsecondary education can only be assessed in economic terms. Postsecondary education has multiple vital purposes but ensuring that learners can secure meaningful work and economic security is a crucially important dimension. Accordingly, postsecondary education should represent a pathway to greater opportunity for 100 percent of students. In order to support state efforts toward that goal, the State Opportunity Index examines five focus areas - Clear Outcomes, Quality Coaching, Affordability, Work-Based Learning, and Employer Alignment - each of which can help increase the percentage of graduates that experience a positive ROI.

Measurement

For each state, the State Opportunity Index identifies the percentage of public college graduates likely to experience a positive ROI within 10 years of completing their degree. (The analysis focuses on graduates for whom their bachelor's degree or associate degree is their highest credential.) In order to cross the positive ROI threshold, graduates must earn wages that are higher than a typical high school graduate in their state, and the total of this earnings premium must exceed the total cost of a degree. Earnings are estimated over a 10-year period and include adjustments for wage growth. Cost of a degree is estimated as the annual net price of attendance (tuition, fees, books, and living expenses minus all grant aid) at public institutions plus student loan fees and interest, multiplied by four years for bachelor's degrees and two years for associate degrees.

Findings

Nationwide, 70 percent of recent public college graduates can expect to experience a positive ROI, including 73 percent of bachelor's degree graduates and 60 percent of associate degree graduates. These national rates of a positive ROI at the two-year and four-year level are similar to the State Opportunity Index results for 2024. Underlying this consistency at the national level is a more dynamic fluctuation of net price and labor market premiums in individual states. In some cases, the net price of attendance and a degree holder's earnings are moving in concert; in others, they are diverging. Graduate earnings, rather than a reduction in the cost of a degree, are the predominant source of improvements found in the 2025 analysis. At the same time, some states experienced a decline in the estimated portion of graduates with a positive ROI.

By state, the percent of all graduates, at both the associate and bachelor's degree level, who can expect to clear the positive ROI threshold within 10 years varies from a high of 82 percent in Washington, D.C., and 77 percent in Alaska to a low of 53 percent in North Dakota.

- At the bachelor's degree level, a positive ROI ranges from 82 percent to 56 percent of graduates, with the positive ROI for the most graduates in the District of Columbia, New York, and California.
- At the associate degree level, a positive ROI ranges from 76 percent to 41 percent, with Alaska delivering a positive ROI for the greatest share of its graduates, followed by South Carolina, New Mexico, and West Virginia.

The results are similar to last year in most states.[1] Notable improvements include:

- Alabama (two-year)
- Alaska (two-year)
- South Carolina (two-year)

These differences are due to relatively higher earnings for graduates rather than reduced cost to learners, and all improvements were driven by gains for associate degree graduates.

FIGURE 1: Percentage of graduates with a positive 10-year ROI by state - all degrees

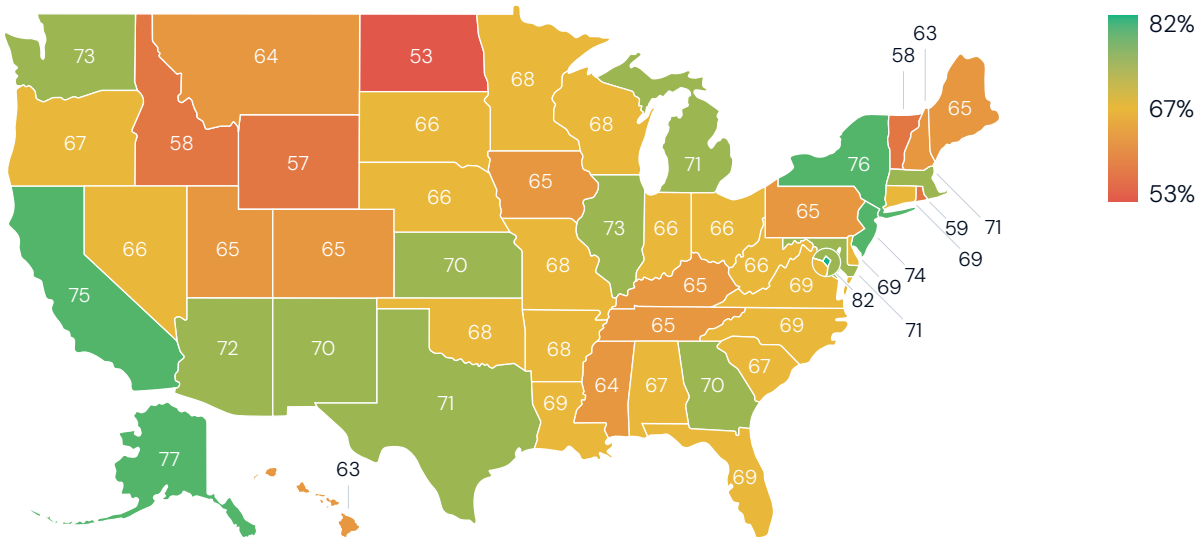


FIGURE 2: Percentage of graduates with a positive 10-year ROI by state - bachelor's degrees

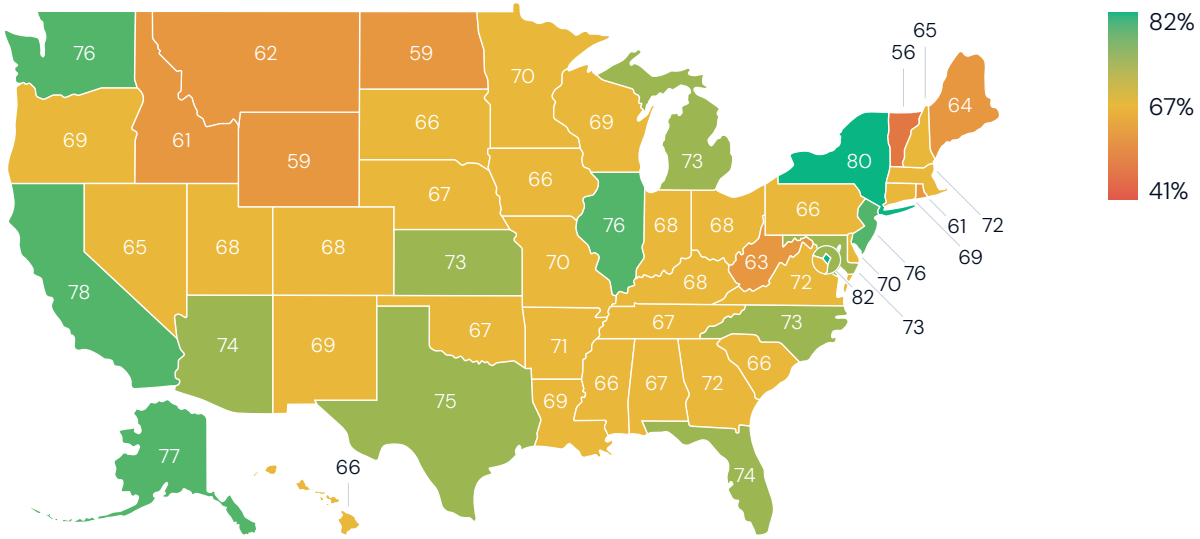
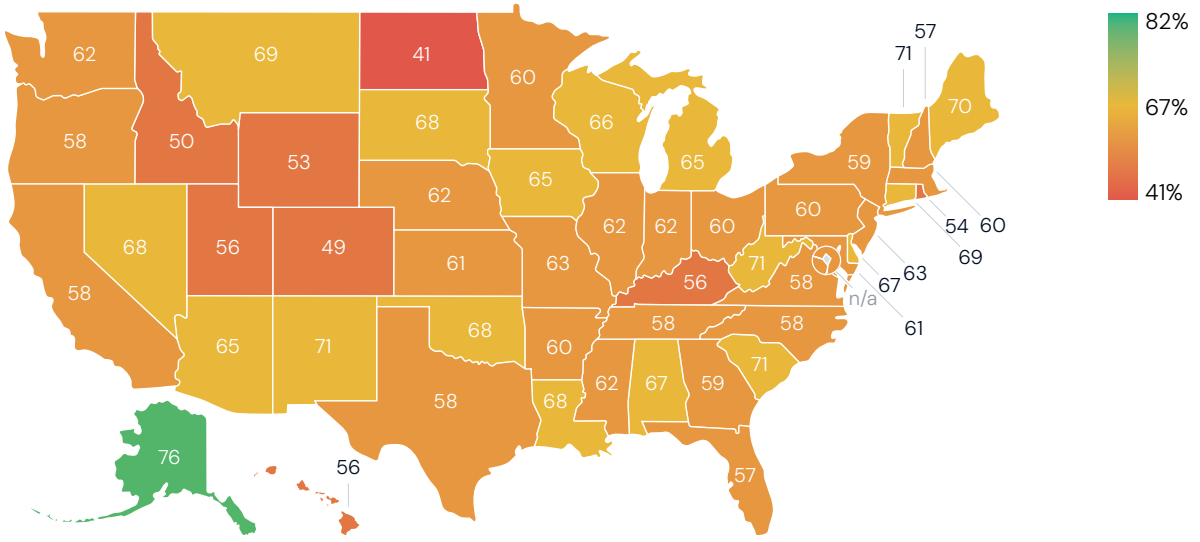


FIGURE 3: Percentage of graduates with a positive 10-year ROI by state - associate degrees



In 2024, graduates who earned an average of at least $50,000 per year over the first 10 years would experience a positive ROI in every state, while those earning an average of less than $30,000 per year over those 10 years would not experience a positive ROI in any state. In 2025, these thresholds have shifted: in the states with the highest combination of education costs and earnings for high school graduates (Massachusetts and New Hampshire), a bachelor's degree graduate would need to earn at least $55,000 per year and an associate degree graduate would need to earn at least $47,000 per year to experience a positive ROI. In New Hampshire, this is driven by the high cost of education, while in Massachusetts, the threshold is due to having the highest median earnings for high school graduates in the country.

Even in the least expensive states for a college degree, and where median high school earnings are lowest (such as Alabama or Louisiana), a bachelor's degree graduate would need to earn at least $40,000 per year and an associate degree graduate would need to earn at least $33,000 per year to experience a positive return on investment.

The strategies laid out in the rest of this report provide keys to ensuring a positive ROI for more learners, while also strengthening talent pipelines for employers.

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Appendix.

Clear Outcomes

Key Takeaways

- States have made substantial progress since 2024.
- The number of states rated as Leading overall has more than doubled compared to 2024, with 20 states now rated as Leading.
- Seventeen states are now Advanced, with 10 moving into this category since last year.
- Many states are now actively working to enhance their wage records in order to have more actionable information about employment outcomes.
- Opportunities for improvement remain, especially in implementation of enhanced wage records, verified data for learning mobility, and dedicated insights capacity.

Strong education-to-employment data infrastructure enables students and families to make informed decisions about their postsecondary education and career pathways, helps state policymakers identify high-value credentials for funding decisions or program approval, and helps institutional leaders target programs for improvement, growth, restructure, or development.

States are increasingly aware that robust education-to-employment data infrastructure is about more than collecting standard enrollment and completion data. Innovative leaders in this space are breaking new ground as they fill critical data gaps around nondegree credentials, gather more robust information about employment outcomes, integrate data from multiple systems, and connect data across state lines. They are also ensuring that timely data are ready to use for policymakers, education and business leaders, researchers, and the public as they establish priorities and make decisions.

Measurement

The Clear Outcomes framework includes 10 elements that serve as a roadmap for developing the capacity and activating partnerships that will increase the utility of state education-to-employment data systems. State progress on each of these 10 elements is categorized on a 1-4 scale, and the average across all 10 elements provides each state's overall Clear Outcomes rating.

Each state's ongoing process in developing its education-to-employment data infrastructure is categorized below. These ratings are developed through self-reported responses by state agency staff and review of publicly available information. Each state was invited to review, comment, and provide any additional information before the categorizations were finalized.

An overall state progress category is calculated by averaging the state's scores across each of the three element categories. States are assigned to one of four groups for their overall rating:

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
>3.0	>2.5 to ≤3.0	≥2.0 to ≤2.5	<2.0

Findings

- Many states have made substantial progress since spring of 2024.
  - The number of states rated as Leading overall has more than doubled compared to 2024, with 20 states now rated as Leading. Eleven states moved up to the Leading category in 2025: Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia.
  - Seventeen states are now Advanced, with 10 states joining this group over the past year: Alabama, California, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming.
- Elements of data integration are strong. Roughly 90 percent of states now rate as Leading or Advanced on longitudinal data from postsecondary education and data-sharing across state lines.
- The most progress was made on dedicated insights capacity: the number of states that are Advanced or Leading on this element increased from 18 to 30.

FIGURE 4:
Clear Outcomes, by state

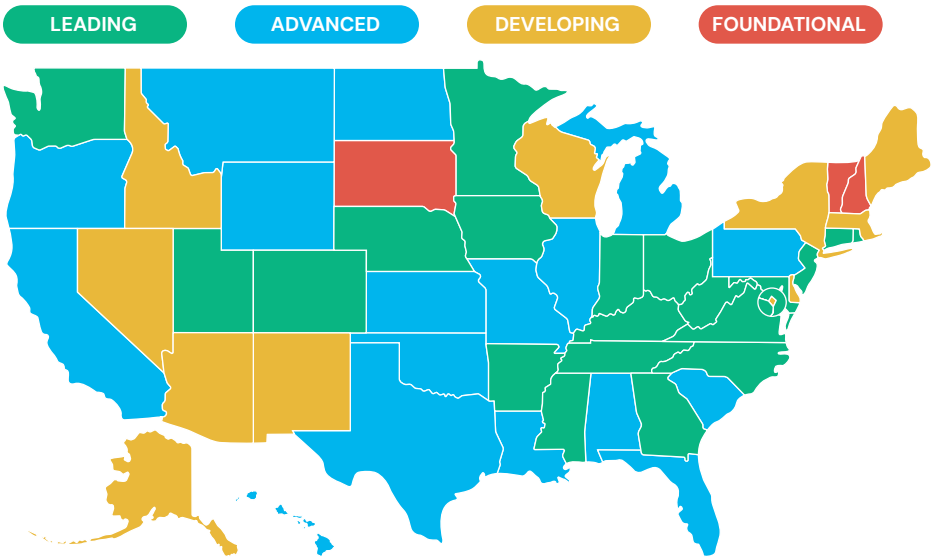


FIGURE 5: Ten key elements of state education-to-employment data systems

State Data System Elements

Across the 10 elements of the Clear Outcomes framework, data should be collected, integrated, and provided to allow disaggregation by institution, program, race/ethnicity, family income, and gender.

COLLECT

Gather the most important data and address key gaps such as short-term credentials and occupation.

1. Includes student-level and program characteristic data for nondegree and noncredit post-high school education and training programs.
2. Examines earnings by occupation, pay rate, and work location.

INTEGRATE

Combine data across systems from high school to college to employment and across states.

3. Integrates and delivers information on learners' earnings and employment after postsecondary education and training completion, and over time.
4. Integrates and delivers information on learners' earnings and employment after high school completion, and over time.
5. Partners with national and multi-state initiatives to assess education-to-opportunity outcomes for graduates and non-graduates of post-high school education and training programs who relocate or work outside the state.

PROVIDE

Ensure data reaches everyone through open data files, interactive tools and researcher access.

6. Provides comprehensive and timely open data files containing aggregate education-to-opportunity statistics that anyone can access, download, and otherwise use.
7. Publishes robust, timely, and easily understandable interactive resources informing education-to-opportunity decision-making.
8. Affords researchers access to individual-level matched education-to-opportunity datasets.

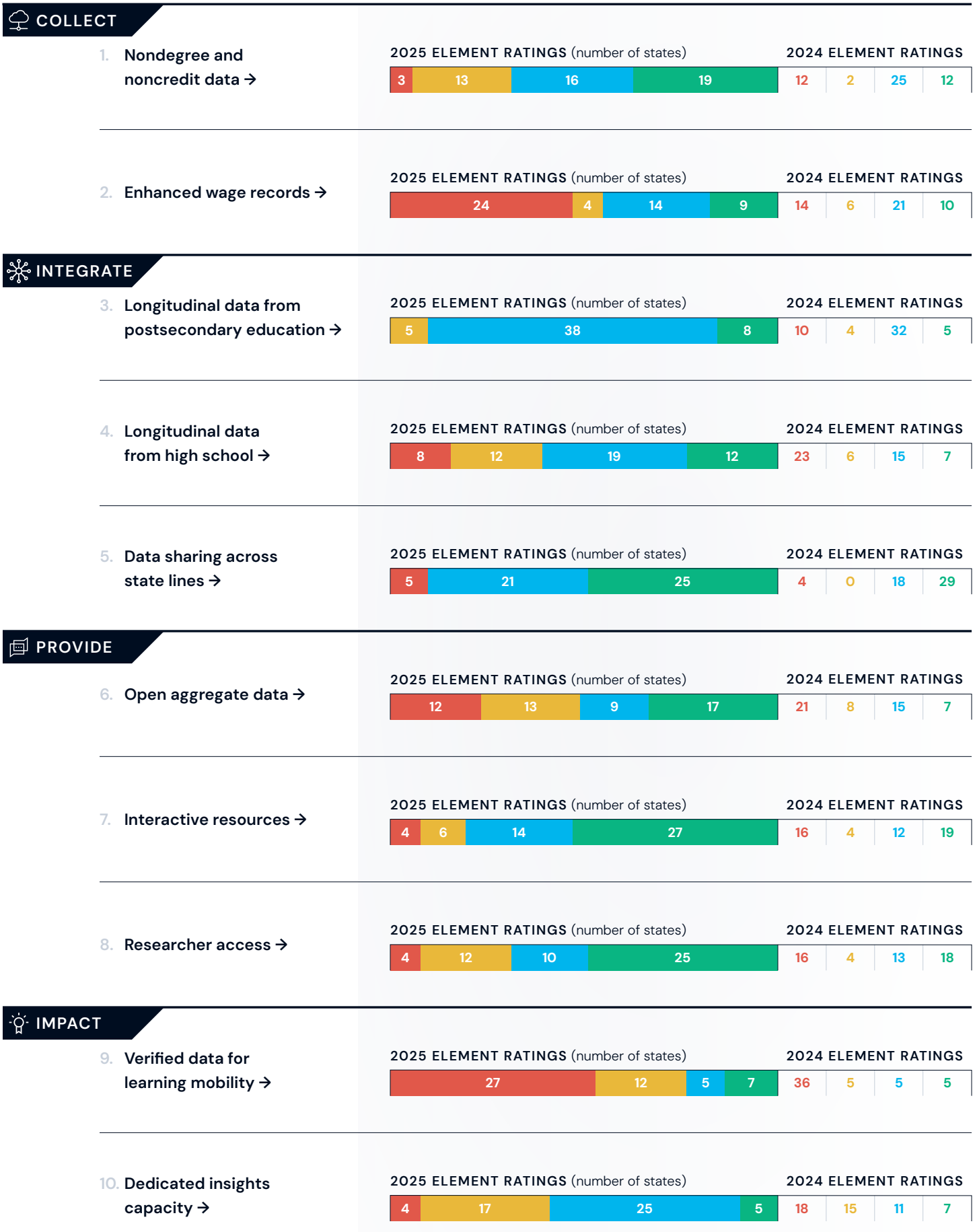
IMPACT

Empower individuals and policymakers with data for better decisions leading to better outcomes.

9. Empowers learners and earners to validate knowledge and skills and to access and utilize their own verified education and employment achievements to navigate lifelong learning pathways and connect with opportunities.
10. Designates a unit with responsibility and dedicated full-time capacity for generating education-to-employment insights and informing state policymaking and resource allocation decisions.

For more detailed information on state outcomes, please see the Appendix.

FIGURE 6: Ten key elements, by year



Action Steps

STATES IN ACTION

For a deeper look at how two states (Minnesota and Montana) have improved statewide education-to-employment data systems to inform decision-making about postsecondary education, visit StateOpportunityIndex.org.

To fully realize the value of postsecondary education in promoting economic opportunity, states must continue to strengthen their education-to-employment data systems. This requires ongoing cross-agency collaboration, strategic investments, and sustained focus on data that demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) for students, institutions, employers, and the state. Key actions include:

Align and collaborate across systems.

- Establish formal collaboration between higher education, workforce, and employment data system leaders to identify and prioritize opportunities for coordinated improvement. Prioritizing at least three elements is helpful for building momentum, while not overwhelming state resources. Alignment across agencies ensures that data investments are strategically targeted, sustainable, and capable of supporting statewide goals around economic opportunity and talent development.

Join national coalitions and initiatives.

- Participate in the Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) coalition in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau to gain access to objective, standardized employment and earnings data for individuals whose education, employment, and residency cross state lines. The coalition also offers peer learning and technical assistance to help states demonstrate the return on investment of postsecondary education and training, enabling stronger policymaking and institutional alignment.

Invest in infrastructure.

- Build infrastructure to capture student-level data from noncredit and nondegree programs and enhance unemployment insurance wage records to enable deeper analysis of job-related outcomes. Infrastructure, privacy, security, and governance are integral to progress. These improvements help ensure that all learners and programs are visible in the data and that policy decisions reflect the full education landscape.

Build capacity to generate insights and empower individuals.

- Assess and strengthen state capacity to generate actionable insights from education-to-employment data. This includes establishing dedicated units with full-time staff and ensuring the system is designed to inform policymakers, institutions, and employers, as well as to facilitate external research and empower individuals. Data systems also should support learners and earners in accessing, validating, and using their own education and employment data to make informed choices about lifelong learning and career pathways.

Ensure clarity and consistency in roles, responsibilities, and resources.

- Establish leadership-level cross-agency data governance in statute or regulation, document roles and responsibilities in policy, and dedicate a consistent funding source to support the work. Clear and consistent funding and a clear written record of who is responsible for making decisions and leading work are fundamental to accelerating progress, facilitating long-term planning, and sustaining momentum across personnel changes.


11:50

Quality Coaching

Key Takeaways

- Student experiences with Quality Coaching at four-year institutions are categorized as Developing in 36 states and Foundational in another three.
- Students at two-year institutions are more likely to experience Quality Coaching: 15 states are Advanced and 10 are Developing at the two-year level.
- Overall, students in each state are most likely to have received support setting goals, pursuing plans, and overcoming barriers.
- The biggest opportunity for improvement is providing students with timely information about labor market needs and opportunities.

Every year, millions of individuals are making choices about postsecondary education and career possibilities. They seek opportunities to learn, develop skills, and achieve life, career, and financial goals. Their decisions, including where to enroll, what to study, and which career path to pursue, help determine whether they are able to fulfill these aspirations. The stakes are high for students and families, and the outcomes can have lifelong implications.

With so many options and so much depending on each decision, no one should have to navigate these choices alone.

When students receive Quality Coaching, meaning education-to-career guidance with three key elements – personalized guidance to select an education and career pathway; timely labor market information to understand potential job opportunities; and support with overcoming obstacles to achieving goals they are more likely to report successful career outcomes and satisfaction with their career.[2]

The state-by-state results reported here, based on more than 56,000 responses from a nationally representative survey of currently enrolled postsecondary students, document student experiences with education-to-career guidance and how this varies across states. While institutions may have a different perspective on whether these services are provided, student reports document the extent to which they perceive that current approaches are effectively reaching them.

Measurement

Students reported whether they received each of the three components of quality coaching:

1. **Personalized guidance** to select education and training experiences.
2. **Timely labor market information** – before enrolling or within the first year of study – on career paths, job opportunities, potential earnings, and outcomes of graduates from their institution.
3. **Support** to set education-to-career goals, develop a plan, and overcome barriers.

Each state's progress on the three elements is categorized as follows:

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
75% to 100% (4)	50% to <75% (3)	25% to <50% (2)	<25% (1)

An overall state progress category is calculated by averaging the state's scores across each of the three element categories. States are assigned to one of four groups for their overall rating:

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
>3.0	>2.5 to ≤3.0	≥2.0 to ≤2.5	<2.0

Findings

Quality Coaching at public four-year institutions

Students' experience with quality coaching is categorized as Developing in 36 states and Foundational in another three. There are insufficient survey responses to categorize progress in 11 states and the District of Columbia in this year's report.

Students in each state are most likely to have received support setting goals, pursuing plans, and overcoming barriers. All 39 states with adequate survey data are rated at least Advanced in this element of Quality Coaching. Delaware and South Carolina are in the Leading category, meaning at least 75 percent of their students at public four-year institutions report receiving support in setting education-to-career goals, developing a plan, and overcoming barriers.

States' progress in ensuring students have personalized guidance is mixed. Most states are at the Developing stage, meaning fewer than half of their public four-year students report receiving personalized guidance in selecting their education and training experiences.

The element with the most room for improvement is student access to timely labor market information. Most states are at the Foundational stage, meaning, on average, less than than 25 percent of their students report receiving information on career pathways, job opportunities, earnings, or labor market outcomes of graduates from their institution, before enrolling or during their first year of study. There are nine states whose progress is on the threshold between Foundational and Developing.

FIGURE 7:
Quality Coaching at public four-year institutions, by state

Insufficient data to report at this time

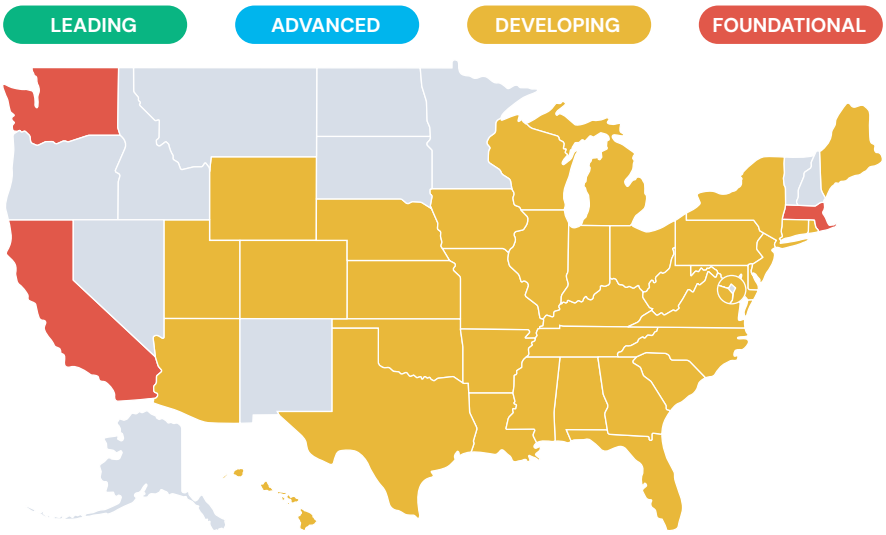


FIGURE 8:
Quality Coaching at public two-year institutions, by state

Insufficient data to report at this time

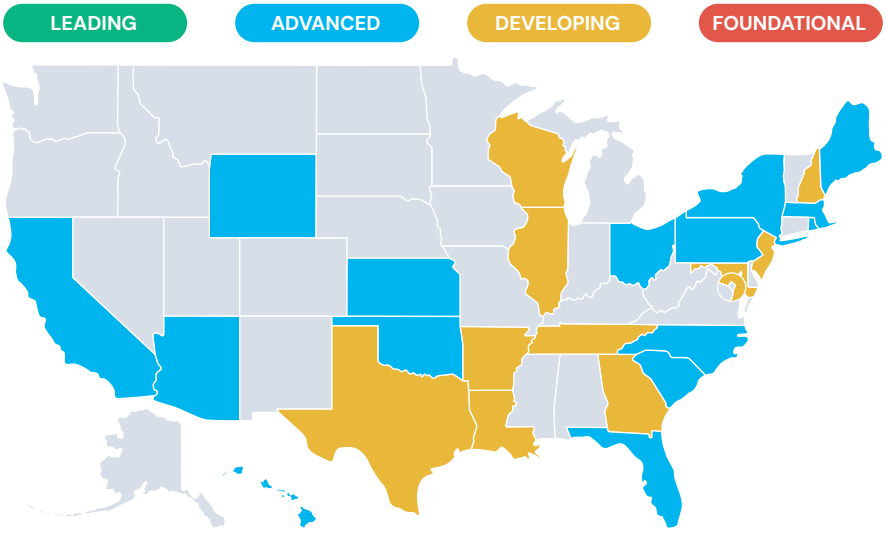


FIGURE 9: Elements of quality coaching at public four-year institutions, by state[3]

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
75% to 100% (4)	50% to <75% (3)	25% to <50% (2)	<25% (1)

	Personalized Guidance	Timely Labor Market Info.	Support
Alabama	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Arizona	Developing	Foundational	Advanced
Arkansas	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
California	Foundational/Developing	Foundational	Advanced
Colorado	Developing	Foundational	Advanced
Connecticut	Foundational/Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced
Delaware	Developing	Foundational/Developing	Leading
Florida	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Georgia	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Hawaii	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Illinois	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Indiana	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Iowa	Foundational/Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced/Leading
Kansas	Developing/Advanced	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Kentucky	Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced/Leading
Louisiana	Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced/Leading
Maine	Developing/Advanced	Foundational	Advanced
Maryland	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Massachusetts	Foundational/Developing	Foundational	Advanced
Michigan	Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced
Mississippi	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Missouri	Developing	Foundational	Advanced
Nebraska	Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced/Leading
New Jersey	Developing	Foundational	Advanced
New York	Developing	Foundational	Advanced
North Carolina	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Ohio	Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced/Leading
Oklahoma	Developing	Foundational	Advanced
Pennsylvania	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Rhode Island	Foundational/Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
South Carolina	Developing	Foundational	Advanced
Tennessee	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Texas	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Utah	Developing/Advanced	Foundational	Advanced
Virginia	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Washington	Foundational/Developing	Foundational	Advanced
West Virginia	Developing	Foundational	Advanced/Leading
Wisconsin	Developing	Foundational/Developing	Advanced
Wyoming	Developing	Foundational	Advanced

For more detailed information on state outcomes, please see the Appendix.

FIGURE 10: Elements of quality coaching at public two-year institutions, by state[3]

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
75% to 100% (4)	50% to <75% (3)	25% to <50% (2)	<25% (1)

	Personalized Guidance	Timely Labor Market Info.	Support
Arizona	Developing/Advanced	Foundational/Developing	Leading
Arkansas	Developing/Advanced	Foundational/Developing	Advanced/Leading
California	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Florida	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Leading
Georgia	Developing/Advanced	Foundational/Developing	Advanced/Leading
Hawaii	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Illinois	Developing	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Kansas	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Louisiana	Foundational/Developing	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Maine	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Maryland	Developing	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Massachusetts	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
New Hampshire	Developing	Developing	Advanced
New Jersey	Developing	Developing	Advanced/Leading
New York	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
North Carolina	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Ohio	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Oklahoma	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Pennsylvania	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Rhode Island	Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
South Carolina	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Tennessee	Foundational/Developing	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Texas	Developing	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Wisconsin	Developing	Developing	Advanced/Leading
Wyoming	Developing/Advanced	Developing	Leading

For more detailed information on state outcomes, please see the Appendix.

Quality Coaching at public two-year institutions

Among the 25 states with sufficient sample size to report on two-year public institutions, 15 states are Advanced and 10 are Developing. The Advanced states at the two-year level include:

- Arizona
- California
- Florida
- Hawaii
- Kansas
- Maine
- Massachusetts
- New York
- North Carolina
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- Wyoming

Consistent with the pattern among four-year students, *support* is the strongest element, with every state with sufficient sample size at least Advanced and three states Leading: Arizona, Florida, and Wyoming.

Personalized guidance is mostly on the threshold between the Developing and Advanced categories, with one state in the Advanced category: Rhode Island.

Timely Information on labor market outcomes is still the weakest link, but most states are at the Developing level.

Action Steps

STATES IN ACTION

For a deeper look at how one state (Mississippi) is advancing Quality Coaching through a statewide approach, visit StateOpportunityIndex.org.

To ensure students are on the right track and make steady progress toward their goals, Quality Coaching should be part of the student experience during — or even before — their first year. There are several steps states can take to support this work:

Reach students early and often.

- Provide students with information, guidance, and support at critical points along their journey, including when they are choosing whether and where to pursue postsecondary education, and once enrolled, selecting a major, finding work-based learning opportunities, and seeking and applying for a first job or graduate school.
- Make it easy for students to access information, guidance, and support by providing it through essential activities and experiences, such as core courses, orientation, or required meetings. If education-to-career guidance is only available to students who take the initiative to seek it out, far too many students will lack the guidance, information, and support they need.

Action Steps *(continued)*

Ensure that labor market information is part of advising students about postsecondary education choices.

- Use the career navigation resources available in your state, and incorporate them into advising meetings, classwork, and other career planning conversations. For example, many states have postsecondary planning and career navigation websites available to the public, featuring information about education pathways and job opportunities.
- Ensure that the people closest to individuals making education-to-career decisions are familiar with, and have ready access to, resources that provide insight into education-to-career pathways and labor market outcomes. For example, this could mean creating one-pagers on where to go for information or providing orientation sessions for different stakeholders on how to use the information and tools.

Scale coaching to students through a combination of technology-enhanced and relationship-driven approaches.

- Students may turn to faculty and staff across the institution, as well as family and community members, for advice and information on college and career planning. Equipping key individuals with education and career planning knowledge and resources will help ensure that students receive quality coaching from people they trust and will help expand their network of support.
- Leverage technology to increase the effectiveness and breadth of support professionals are able to provide to students — the right information at the right time for maximum benefit.
- Explore ways for artificial intelligence (AI) to potentially augment human coaches with deeper insights and more personalized, timely, and accurate guidance. AI could potentially create efficient cost models to deliver high-quality support, expanding access from early engagement through education and career transitions. For example, institutions may use AI platforms to efficiently provide round-the-clock support to students and share insights back with coaches to help tailor their interactions with students. AI coaching platforms and other technology tools could also be integrated into course activities, giving instructors the opportunity to incorporate career exploration and guidance into curriculum.

Incorporate coaching into state programs and/or requirements that could benefit from a coaching component.

- Receiving coaching alongside opportunities such as dual enrollment, early college, or work-based learning can help students make the most of these experiences and integrate them into their education and career planning.
- Ensure that guidance, support, and discussion of labor market information are included in experiences that are already high school graduation requirements, such as career planning coursework, or meetings with a counselor or mentor.

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Appendix.


Dogs rule.

Affordability

Key Takeaways

- One state, Florida, is in the Leading category for four-year institutions.
- States are strongest in affordability of two-year institutions.
- Four-year institutions are considerably less affordable than two-year institutions.
- On-time completion is a challenge in nearly every state. Currently, there are only 13 states in which the majority of students at four-year institutions complete a degree in four years.

The cost of postsecondary education plays a major role in individuals' decision to enroll, their ability to complete a degree, and the return they get from that investment. Learners from families with lower and middle incomes are especially affected by the relatively high dollar amount they and their families are expected to contribute.

In order to understand the expectations placed on students and families, it is necessary to go beyond sticker prices to look at the full picture, factoring in non-tuition costs, financial aid, and a student's ability to earn enough money to cover the balance. In addition, time plays an important role in the cost of education. The longer someone takes to complete a degree, the greater the financial burden typically is, in terms of both additional tuition and fees, and in delayed entrance to employment.

Measurement

In the 2025 edition of the State Opportunity Index, Affordability is now based on three elements. Element one was introduced in the 2024 report, while elements two and three are new additions:

1. The number of hours the average state resident student would need to work to cover the annual cost of their education at a public institution in each state.
2. The number of hours a state resident student from the lowest income group would need to work to cover the annual cost of their education at a public institution in each state.
3. The percent of students completing their degree on time.

Hours of work needed are calculated by dividing the average annual net price by the median wage earned by college students in each state.[4] Annual net price includes in-state tuition, fees, books, supplies, and living expenses — minus all institutional grants and scholarship awards.[5] The first element of the metric is based on average net price for all students in the cohort, and the second is based on the average net price for students from families earning $30,000 per year or less. The final element is timely completion. This is measured as the percentage of students attending four-year institutions who complete a degree in four years. On-time completion for students attending two-year institutions is not included in the metric, as full-time attendance does not reflect the experience of most community college students.

Findings

Affordability of public four-year institutions

Florida is the only Leading state for Affordability at four-year institutions.

Eight states are Advanced, 24 are Developing, and 18 are Foundational. In terms of the number of hours of work needed for the average student to cover their education expenses, four-year institutions are considerably less affordable than two-year institutions. In 35 states, the average student would need to work more than 30 hours per week in order to cover the costs of their education, and in another 12 states the average student would need to work between 20 and 30 hours per week. No states are Leading on this element, but four states are Advanced: Alaska, California, Florida, and New York. For low-income students, the picture looks much better. Nine states are Leading (Alaska, California, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Washington, and Wyoming) and another 18 states are Advanced.

Compared to 2024, the biggest improvements in Affordability were in Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and West Virginia. In the latest available data, each of these most improved states saw a decrease in their net price with the exception of Montana, where net price increased, but student wages increased at a rate large enough to make up for the higher costs.

On-time completion is a challenge in nearly every state. Currently, there are only 13 states in which the majority of students at four-year institutions complete a degree in four years, and only one state (Delaware) passes the threshold for Leading (at least 65 percent on-time completion).

Affordability of public two-year institutions

States are strong in terms of a student's ability to pay for education at two-year institutions. When averaging the two elements, 35 states are Leading, and 10 states are Advanced for affordability of their two-year institutions.

Twenty-three states are Leading on hours of work needed for the average student, meaning that a student could cover their costs by working fewer than 10 hours per week during the school year and full time during the summer in nearly half of states across the country. Students would need only to increase their weekly part-time hours to 20 or more in five states. The results are even better when considering students in the lowest income category. For these students, 49 of 50 states are either Leading (35 states) or Advanced (14 states).

FIGURE 11:
Affordability of public four-year institutions, by state

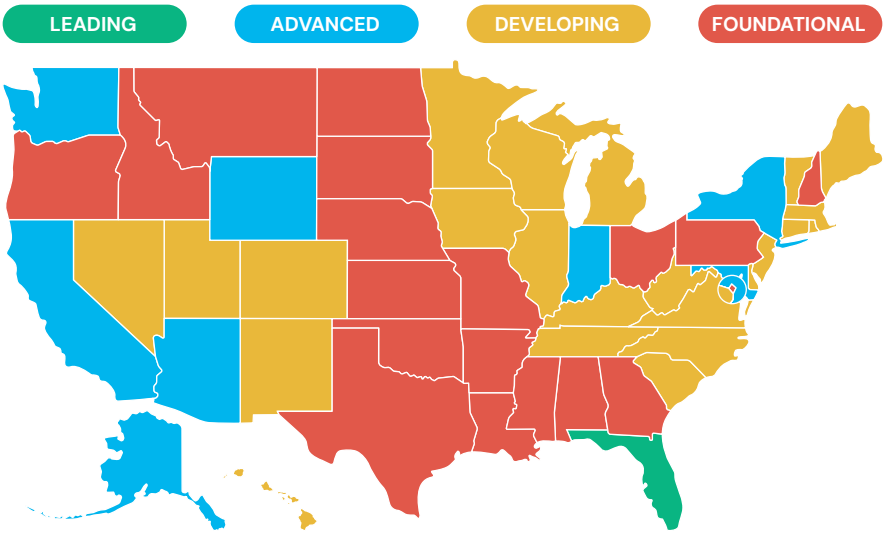


FIGURE 12:
Affordability of public two-year institutions, by state

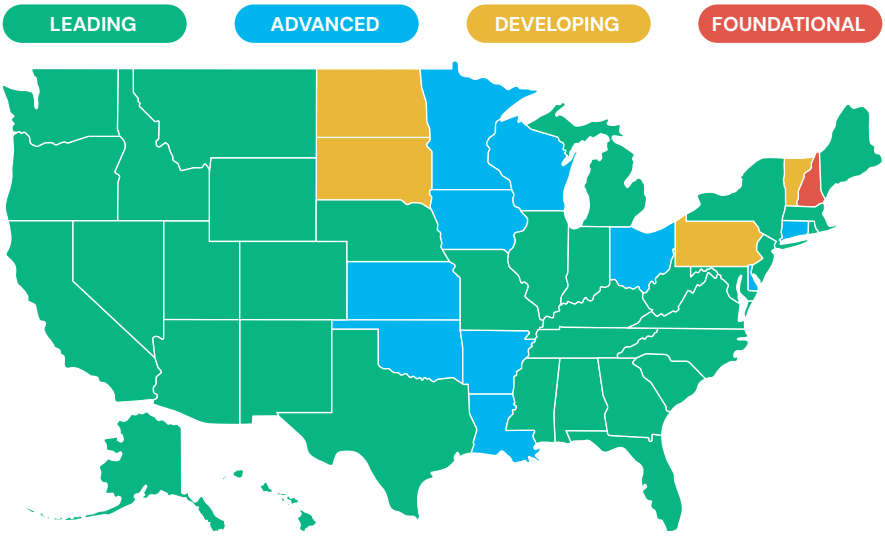


FIGURE 13:
Elements of affordability, by state

STUDENT HOURS OF WORK NEEDED

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
<10 hrs	10 to <20 hrs	20 to <30 hrs	≥30 hrs

ON-TIME COMPLETION

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
≥65%	50% to <65%	35% to <50%	<35%

	Hours of Work Needed (4-Year)	Low-Income Hours of Work Needed (4-Year)	On-Time Completion (4-Year)	Hours of Work Needed (2-Year)	Low-Income Hours of Work Needed (2-Year)
AL	Foundational	Foundational	Developing	Leading	Leading
AK	Advanced	Leading	Foundational	Leading	Leading
AZ	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Leading
AK	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
CA	Advanced	Leading	Developing	Leading	Leading
CO	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Leading
CT	Foundational	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced
DE	Foundational	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Advanced
D.C.	Developing	Developing	Foundational	Unavailable	Unavailable
FL	Advanced	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Leading
GA	Foundational	Developing	Foundational	Advanced	Leading
HI	Developing	Advanced	Foundational	Leading	Leading
ID	Foundational	Developing	Foundational	Leading	Leading
IL	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Leading
IN	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Leading
IA	Foundational	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced
KS	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
KY	Developing	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Leading
LA	Foundational	Foundational	Foundational	Advanced	Advanced
ME	Developing	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Leading
MD	Foundational	Leading	Advanced	Advanced	Leading
MA	Foundational	Advanced	Advanced	Leading	Leading
MI	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Leading
MN	Foundational	Leading	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
MS	Foundational	Foundational	Developing	Leading	Leading
MI	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Leading
MO	Foundational	Developing	Foundational	Advanced	Leading
NE	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Leading
NV	Developing	Advanced	Foundational	Leading	Leading
NH	Foundational	Foundational	Advanced	Foundational	Foundational

For more detailed information on state outcomes, please see the Appendix.

FIGURE 13:
Elements of affordability, by state *(continued)*

STUDENT HOURS OF WORK NEEDED

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
<10 hrs	10 to <20 hrs	20 to <30 hrs	≥30 hrs

ON-TIME COMPLETION

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
≥65%	50% to <65%	35% to <50%	<35%

	Hours of Work Needed (4-Year)	Low-Income Hours of Work Needed (4-Year)	On-Time Completion (4-Year)	Hours of Work Needed (2-Year)	Low-Income Hours of Work Needed (2-Year)
NJ	Foundational	Advanced	Advanced	Leading	Leading
NM	Developing	Advanced	Foundational	Leading	Leading
NY	Advanced	Leading	Developing	Leading	Leading
NC	Foundational	Advanced	Advanced	Leading	Leading
ND	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Developing	Advanced
OH	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
OK	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
OR	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Leading
PA	Foundational	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced
RI	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Leading
SC	Foundational	Developing	Advanced	Leading	Leading
SD	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Developing	Advanced
TN	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Leading
TX	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Leading
UT	Developing	Advanced	Foundational	Advanced	Leading
VT	Foundational	Advanced	Advanced	Developing	Advanced
VA	Foundational	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Leading
WA	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Leading
WV	Developing	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Leading
WI	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
WY	Developing	Leading	Developing	Advanced	Leading

Action Steps

STATES IN ACTION
For a deeper look at how two states (Florida and Washington) are addressing Affordability with broad-based policies and investments, visit StateOpportunityIndex.org.

As states work to enable more individuals to affordably pursue their educational and career goals, regardless of where they start from, there are several steps they can take:

Adopt policies that prioritize affordability for learners from low- and middle-income families.

- Focus on need-based grant programs, ensuring that state aid dollars go to support the students who face the greatest financial barriers. Research has demonstrated the importance of need-based financial aid in addressing affordability and increasing access and completion.

Action Steps *(continued)*

Create mechanisms for shared responsibility among government, families, and employers.

- Broaden opportunities for students to make meaningful contributions to their education through expanded work-study, work-based learning, and service corps opportunities. For example, Maryland has a service-year option for individuals 18 years and older.
- Scale initiatives that combine strategic employer contributions, public dollars, and institutional support to reduce the overall cost burden on students and families.

Adopt policies and practices that help students complete in less time.

- Ensure smooth and predictable transfer pathways and credit for prior learning, paired with strong academic support and effective advising, thus allowing students to reduce their time to completion and more predictably plan for the total cost of their degree.
- Explore and support program models that allow students to complete their degrees and credentials more quickly, without compromising quality. Some existing and emerging models include:
  - **Community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs,** which offer learners a seamless, lower-cost path to a bachelor's degree in a workforce-aligned program built on an existing associate degree infrastructure.
  - **Three-year bachelor's degree pathways** that restructure credits and academic calendars to allow students to complete their programs in less time, reducing both direct tuition and fee costs and opportunity costs from being out of the workforce.
  - **Dual enrollment and dual credit** opportunities that are accessible to all students, particularly those who are the first in their family to attend college or who attend under-resourced or rural high schools. Well-supported dual enrollment programs can help students earn college credit early, reducing the time and money needed for a degree and credential.

Improve transparency about the cost of postsecondary education and time to completion.

- Students and families make better decisions when they understand what their postsecondary education program will cost and how long it will take to finish. States should promote policies that require clear, consistent information about tuition, fees, financial aid, and typical time-to-degree across institutions. These policies should also encourage multi-year cost estimates and student-centered pricing and financial aid communication. Many institutions have already made this commitment (see collegeprice.org for more detail). Doing so can reduce confusion, prevent costly delays, and build public confidence in the value of postsecondary education.

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Appendix.

Work-Based Learning

Key Takeaways

- Participation is growing, but uneven, and data tracking participation in work-based learning remains spotty.
- Forty-three percent of graduating seniors at four-year institutions report having had at least one of the five paid work-based learning experiences: internship, co-op, practicum/clinical/ student teaching, undergraduate research, and apprenticeship.
- At the two-year level nationally, 17 percent of students currently enrolled in 2025 reported having one of the five paid work-based learning experiences.
- Participation in paid internships increased to 37 percent of students nationally, up from 26 percent of graduates from 2020-2023.

Quality work-based learning experiences during college are associated with better employment outcomes following graduation. These demonstrated benefits include stronger earnings, increased likelihood to be in a job that requires a college degree, and higher career satisfaction. Every student should have the chance to have a quality work-based learning experience that meaningfully strengthens their own unique connection between education and opportunity.

Students are increasingly interested in work-based learning opportunities and report seeking these experiences as a way to improve their career outcomes. They tend to find especially high value in work-based learning that they feel boosts their technical skills and expands their professional network.[6]

States and institutions also recognize the value of work-based learning, and many are seeking ways to make these experiences accessible to more students. One challenge they encounter is the lack of systematic data needed to understand what participation currently looks like or to benchmark themselves relative to other states and the nation. To help address this need, the data reported here, based on more than 56,000 responses from a nationally representative survey of students, provide a look into participation rates in work-based learning and how it varies across states.

Measurement

The inaugural State Opportunity Index in 2024 focused exclusively on paid internships. Seeking to incorporate a more comprehensive view of quality work-based learning experiences, the State Opportunity Index includes five experiences:

1. Paid internship
2. Paid co-op
3. Paid practicum, student teaching, or clinical hours
4. Paid undergraduate research experience outside of a course
5. Apprenticeship (paid, by definition)

Each of these five models included as a quality work-based learning experience fulfills at least one of the following criteria:

- ✓ Evidence of improved employment and earnings outcomes (paid internship, co-op, apprenticeship).[7]
- ✓ Ties to graduate or professional school enrollment in an aligned field (undergraduate research).[8]
- ✓ Standard of practice for specific careers (practicum, student teaching, clinical).

We emphasize pay as an important dimension of Work-Based Learning because the evidence clearly shows that paid internships are associated with strong employment and earnings outcomes, and a lack of compensation often limits access to these opportunities for some students. While we acknowledge that for-credit and embedded work-based learning experiences offer career and educational value, only paid work-based learning experiences meet the criteria for quality and equitable access.

Reflecting a goal that most students benefit from a quality work-based learning experience, each state's progress is categorized according to the proportion of students who participated in at least one of these experiences:

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
≥75%	50% to <75%	25% to <50%	<25%

In cases in which the survey of a state's students resulted in a finding where the margin of error spanned across a category threshold, a state is classified in a joint category, such as Developing/Advanced.

Findings

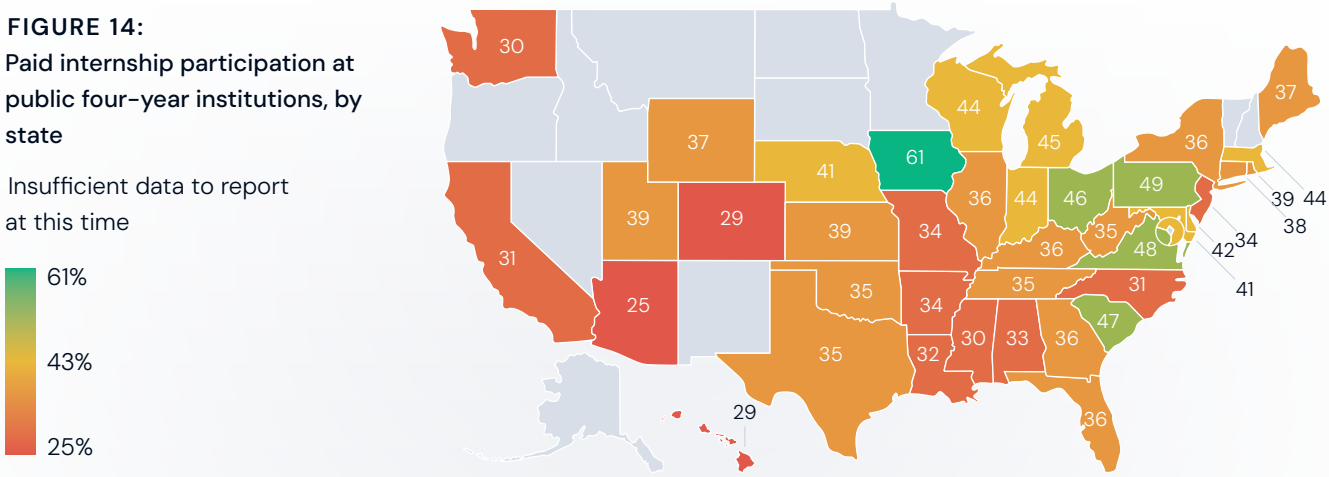
Work-based learning at public four-year institutions

Paid internships

There has been a marked increase in access to paid internships across the nation, with 37 percent of students graduating in the calendar year 2025 reporting they had this experience. By comparison, 26 percent of graduates from the classes of 2020-2023 reported completing a paid internship in the 2024 State Opportunity Index. Some of this increase may be attributed to suppressed levels of internship participation for the classes of 2020-2023 during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, nationally representative data from prior to the pandemic found that among the class of 2016, only about one in four bachelor's degree graduates had participated in a paid internship, indicating that we are likely seeing a real increase, rather than simply a rebound to pre-pandemic levels.[9]

There is also variation across states in how many graduating students at public colleges and universities report having a paid internship. Student participation in Iowa, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin are all above the national average. There were insufficient survey responses in 11 states to report on paid internship participation.

FIGURE 14:
Paid internship participation at public four-year institutions, by state



Quality work-based learning: Across all five experiences

Using the expanded criteria for quality work-based learning, 43 percent of students at four-year institutions report having one of the five quality work-based learning experiences noted above (paid internship, paid co-op, paid practicum/clinical/student teaching, paid undergraduate research, and apprenticeship). The states with the highest total participation in the five types of paid quality work-based learning include the following Advanced states:

- Iowa
- Pennsylvania

States that are in the Developing/Advanced category include:

- Delaware
- Indiana
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- Michigan
- Nebraska
- Ohio
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- Utah
- Virginia
- Wisconsin

Overall, for students attending four-year institutions, two states are Advanced, 12 states are Developing/Advanced, and 25 states are Developing. There are no states in the Foundational category, indicating that every state has existing strengths in their commitment to quality work-based learning. Eleven states and the District of Columbia did not have sample sizes large enough to report at this time.

FIGURE 15:
Quality work-based learning at four-year institutions, by state

Insufficient data to report at this time

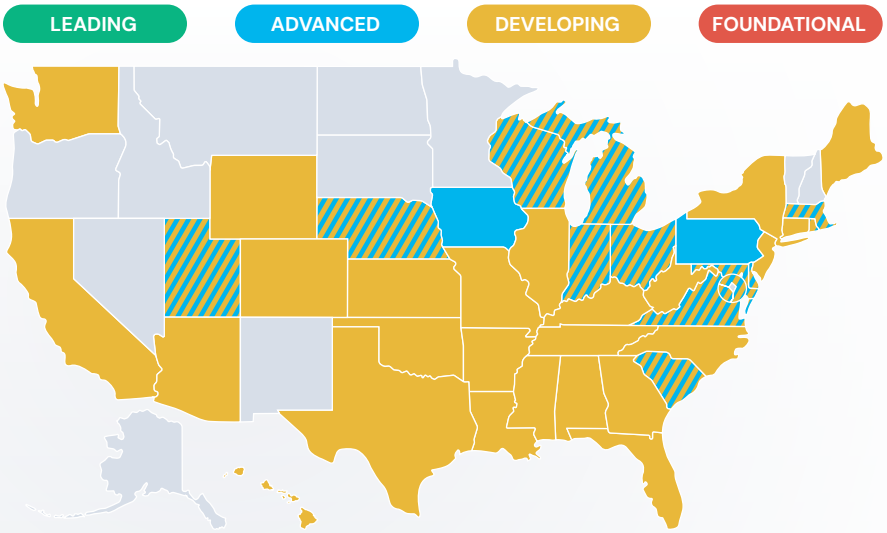


FIGURE 16:
Participation and pay across five types of work-based learning, four-year institutions

	Participated	Participated and were paid
Internship	53%	37%
Apprenticeship	3%	3%
Co-op	3%	1%
Practicum, clinical, student teaching	18%	3%
Undergraduate research	22%	3%
Any of these experiences	72%	**43%**

The national average of 43 percent of students participating in at least one of the five quality work-based learning experiences is only slightly higher than the national average of 37 percent participation in paid internships. This means only a small percentage of students have engaged in these other quality work-based learning models without having a paid internship.

In some cases, participation rates are low – only 3 percent of seniors report having participated in a co-op and only 3 percent report having had an apprenticeship (apprentices whose related technical instruction took place outside of the formal education system would not be captured by this measure). In other cases, participation is higher – 22 percent for undergraduate research and 18 percent for practicum, student teaching or clinical – but pay is relatively rare.

If all students received pay for their internships, co-ops, practica, and undergraduate research, 72 percent of students would have had a qualifying experience. One way for states to make substantial progress would be expanding access to pay for students participating in work-based learning experiences.

Work-based learning at public two-year institutions

Paid internships

At the two-year level nationally, 14 percent of students currently enrolled in 2025 reported completing a paid internship. This is higher than the national average of 10 percent for the classes of 2020-2023 reported in the 2024 State Opportunity Index.

Quality work-based learning: Across all five experiences

Using the expanded criteria for quality work-based learning, 17 percent of two-year students report having participated. One reason participation in work-based learning is substantially lower for community college students is their existing work commitments: nearly three-quarters of community college students work, and 46 percent work full time while enrolled.[10] Providing opportunities for these students may require additional creativity and flexibility tailored to the needs of these working learners.

Data that are representative at the state level for students at two-year institutions are available for a smaller subset of states. Nearly all states are at the Foundational level, with the exception of the following states:

Developing/Advanced

- Arizona

Foundational/Developing

- Arkansas
- Florida
- Kansas
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- Pennsylvania

FIGURE 17:
Quality work-based learning at two-year institutions, by state

- Insufficient data to report at this time

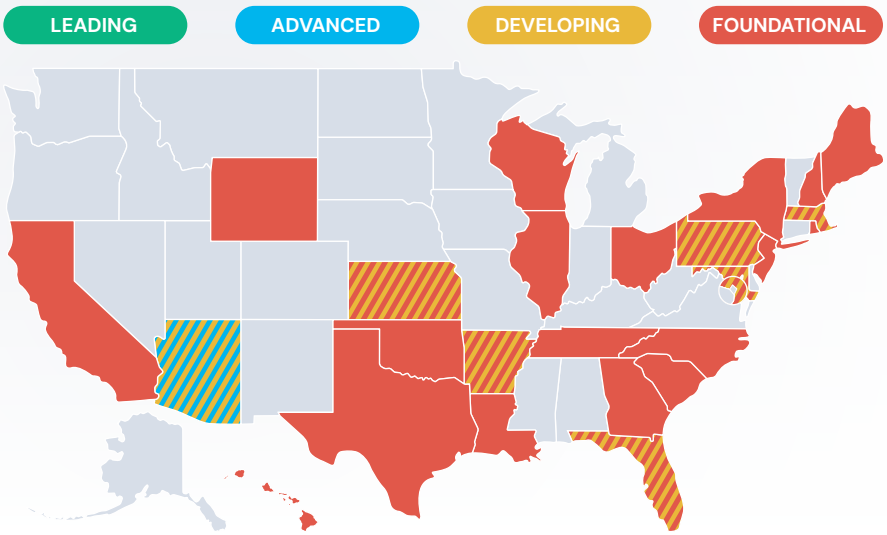


FIGURE 18:
Participation and pay across five types of work-based learning, two-year institutions

	Participated	Participated and were paid
Internship	20%	14%
Apprenticeship	3%	3%
Co-op	3%	0.5%
Practicum, clinical, student teaching	10%	1%
Undergraduate research	4%	0.3%
Any of these experiences	33%	**17%**

Students attending two-year institutions were just as likely as their counterparts at four-year institutions to have participated in a co-op (3 percent) or an apprenticeship (3 percent). However, participation in other forms of work-based learning was lower than for students at four-year institutions and was very seldom paid. Providing pay for practica, clinicals, and student teaching, as well as expanding participation across any of these modes, will be key to ensuring that students at two-year institutions are able to experience the benefits of quality work-based learning.

For more detailed information on state outcomes and demographic breakdowns of outcomes, please see the Appendix.

Action Steps

STATES IN ACTION
For a deeper look at how three states (Indiana, Louisiana, and Maryland) are expanding Work-Based Learning through broad-based efforts across institutions, visit StateOpportunityIndex.org.

As states work to broaden access and increase student participation in quality work-based learning, there are several steps they can take:

Track and assess the outcomes of work-based learning.

- Embed collection of data on work-based learning experiences into existing systems, such as academic records and state unemployment insurance wage records.
- Measure participation in and outcomes of work-based learning to strengthen the case for institutional and employer participation.
- Track the connection between work-based learning participation and graduate employment outcomes to understand the ROI for learners, institutions, and employers.
- Pursue continuous improvement with mechanisms for feedback from institutions, employers, and students.

Action Steps *(continued)*

Set shared work-based learning goals that align stakeholders.

- Establish state-level and institution-level goals for work-based learning to help structure commitments by policymakers and employers, as well as philanthropic and education leaders, to support common goals.
- Use strategic communications, convenings, and existing coordinating structures to establish and reinforce the goal, respective roles, shared progress, and successful outcomes.
- Leverage the state higher education governance structure (if applicable) to encourage institutional accountability for work-based learning.

Simplify the process of creating and supporting work-based learning.

- Incentivize strong coordination between employer/industry groups and academic leaders, rooted in labor market needs and driven by employers. For example, in North Carolina, a partnership between Surry Community College, Northern Regional Hospital, and the regional nonprofit Surry-Yadkin Works resulted in a project that developed pathways into health care careers, filling nursing shortages at the hospital with registered nurse apprentices and securing employment for more than 100 students as pre-apprentices. The model is now being replicated across the state.
- Strengthen and/or create the business-facing intermediaries needed to coordinate employer action and provide technical assistance setting up work-based learning programs.
- Encourage institutions to partner with organizations that support students in their pursuit of work-based learning and leverage technology solutions that make it easier for employers and faculty to adopt work-based learning.
- Use incentive funding for institutions and employers that work together to expand access to work-based learning, including the development of aligned curriculum, work-based learning placements, and hiring commitments.
- Provide seed funding that enables institutions to strengthen work-based learning and expand access for all learners.

Examine and address structural impediments to paying students in clinicals, practica, and student teaching

- Review the requirements of licensing boards, professional organizations, and specialized accreditors, both state and national, to understand any potential barriers to pay for students participating in clinicals or practica. Alabama has addressed this issue by creating a nursing apprenticeship program so that students can be paid for their clinical hours.
- Consider state subsidies or other forms of support for students in career pathways where state needs are high but employers' ability to offer pay for work-based learning is low. For example, Pennsylvania now provides a stipend to student teachers in order to ease the financial strain on students and reduce teacher shortages.

Employer Alignment

Key Takeaways

- Consistent with 2024, no states meet the overall Employer Alignment criteria for Leading. Only three states are Advanced (California, Rhode Island, and Utah), 34 are Developing, and 14 are Foundational.
- College-level employment rates of early-career graduates are highest in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Utah, and Washington.
- Top states for meeting the demand for talent in opportunity jobs (i.e., selected roles in higher-wage, high-demand occupations) include include California, Mississippi, Rhode Island, and Utah.
- States are most likely to have gaps in finance and accounting (professionals and support), health care technicians and technologists, manufacturing/trades technicians and technologists, and nursing.

All learners should have access to postsecondary education programs that lead to quality jobs and mobility. Likewise, employers benefit when learners are aware of and have access to programs that lead to high-wage, in-demand jobs. Unfortunately, states generally do not fund public higher education institutions in ways that encourage these opportunities to be addressed. Indeed, current state funding models are more likely to penalize institutions for responding to labor market demands.

Each state's progress in Employer Alignment considers both the career outcomes of recent graduates and the extent to which employer needs are being met in key occupational groups. This approach enables states to assess the alignment between the supply and demand for qualified entry-level employees.

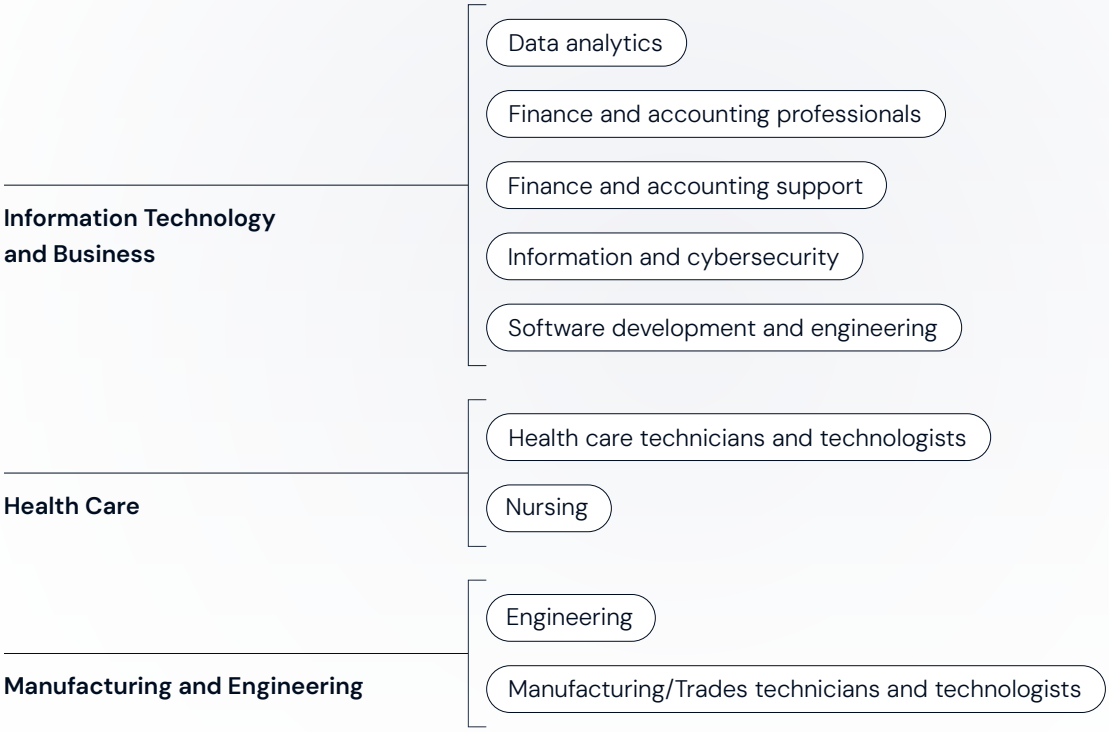
Measurement

The Employer Alignment metric for each state, and the nation, is an average score made up of the percentage of bachelor's degree holders (with no further advanced degrees) employed in jobs that typically require a college degree, and the supply/demand ratio for a key set of high-demand, high-wage entry-level jobs (opportunity jobs) in each state.

We identified the subset of occupations included in the supply/demand analysis (see Figure 19) as opportunity jobs — they deliver strong initial earnings and continued economic advancement. Together, the opportunity jobs across these nine occupational areas represent about one-third of the entry-level labor market demand for associate and bachelor's degree holders nationally. While each state's economy is distinct, the prevalence for these opportunity jobs is substantial throughout the country, representing between 25 percent and 35 percent of the entry-level jobs in every state.

Within each state, supply is calculated as the number of degrees awarded in education programs (public and private) associated with opportunity jobs, while demand measures the number of projected job openings requiring the respective degree and up to three years of experience. Dividing supply by demand provides the percentage of demand for opportunity jobs that is met by the colleges and universities in each state.

FIGURE 19: Opportunity occupations



Measurement *(continued)*

There are a few changes of note to the methodology compared to 2024:

- The age range for measuring underemployment is expanded from 26-30 to 25-34.
- Demand is measured via Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) employment projections for job openings due to growth and replacements, using job postings to calculate the share of these openings that require an associate or bachelor's degree and zero to three years of experience. If experience level or education level are not listed, they are estimated based on typical requirements as captured in survey data from the BLS. The 2024 approach was similar but relied more heavily on job postings and did not include listings for which no educational or experience requirements were listed.

Each state's talent supply/demand ratio is averaged with the college-level employment percentages of recent bachelor's degree graduates to produce the Employer Alignment indicator for the state's education system and its labor market. State progress is categorized accordingly:

LEADING	ADVANCED	DEVELOPING	FOUNDATIONAL
≥75%	60% to <75%	50% to <60%	<50%

Findings

As was the case last year, no states meet the **overall Employer Alignment** criteria for Leading.

- Three states are Advanced: California, Rhode Island, and Utah.
- 34 states are Developing.
- 14 states are Foundational.

Top states for the percentage of **graduates with college-level employment** are:

- District of Columbia - 72%
- Utah - 63%
- Maryland, Massachusetts, and Washington - 62%
- Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia - 61%

Top states for meeting the **demand for talent in opportunity jobs** include California, Mississippi, Rhode Island, and Utah. Compared to last year, many more states are producing adequate talent in data analytics and information and cybersecurity, and software development production remains strong. States are most likely to have gaps in finance and accounting (professionals and support), health care technicians and technologists, manufacturing/trades technicians and technologists, and nursing. For production of engineering talent, there was more variation across states, with about 70 percent of states at the Leading or Advanced stages and 30 percent in the Developing or Foundational stages.

For more detailed information on state outcomes, please see the Appendix.

FIGURE 20:
Employer Alignment, by state

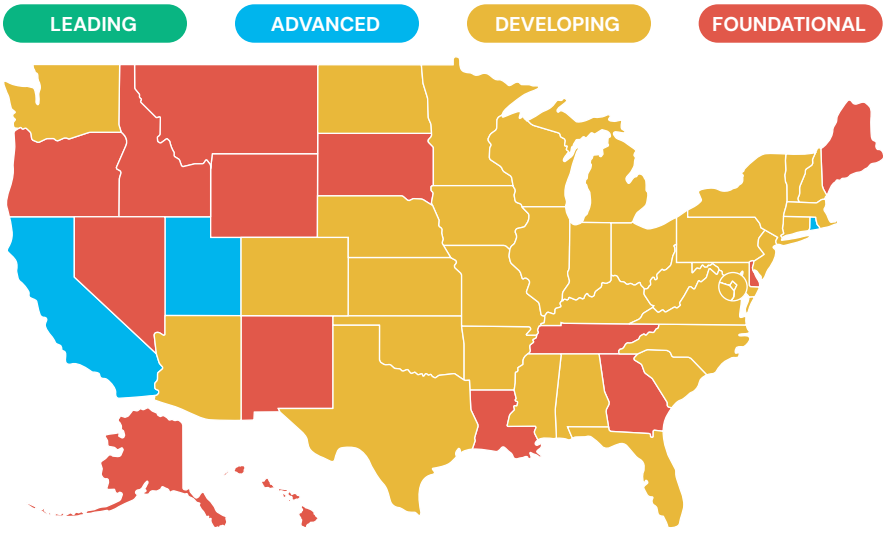


FIGURE 21:
Percentage of recent bachelor's degree completers (ages 25-34) with college-level jobs, by state

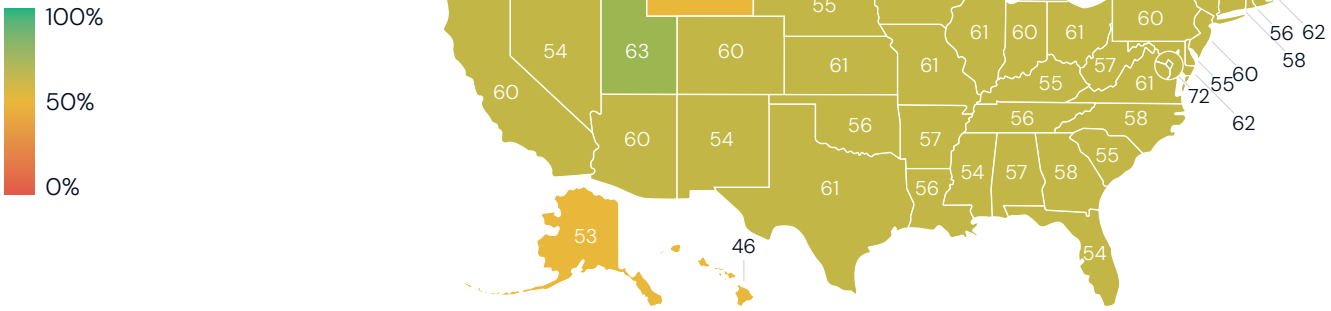
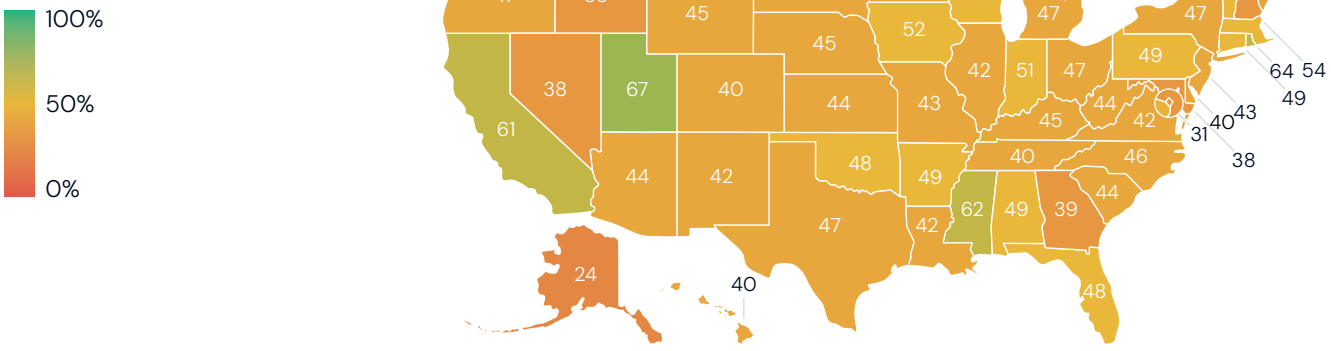


FIGURE 22:
Supply/demand ratio for opportunity jobs, by state



Action Steps

STATES IN ACTION

For a deeper look at how two states (Kentucky and Virginia) are strengthening Employer Alignment through comprehensive state strategies, visit StateOpportunityIndex.org.

As states work to ensure that everyone has access to quality jobs and mobility, and that employer talent needs for high-wage jobs are met, there are several constructive steps they can take:

- **Build the dedicated capacity needed to provide consistent, trusted, and timely analyses of education-to-employment pathways and talent needs to inform states' talent development goals and strategies.** Such a dedicated state office or staff can serve as the trusted, central source of analysis, providing states with actionable insights into the supply of and demand for talent, labor market trends, and the employment outcomes of postsecondary education programs. They can also support coordination across agencies and allow for the integration of diverse state data that can generate novel insights and customized tools that inform states' efforts to more effectively target their investments toward evolving economic needs.
- **Develop a joint strategic talent plan that aligns K-12, postsecondary education, workforce development, and economic development systems around shared goals for promoting opportunity and economic competitiveness.** States can coordinate education and workforce stakeholders to develop a unified vision and plan to ensure talent pipelines are responsive to evolving industry needs and grounded in state and regional economic priorities. Recognizing that each system will have its own strategic plan, the joint talent plan should focus on key connection points between the systems that are necessary for collective success. States should employ forecasts of labor market needs and sector-based strategies to identify priority talent needs. The opportunity here is to build a dynamic, agile ecosystem that enables state residents to access opportunity while supporting the economic growth and vitality of the state.
- **Improve the responsiveness of postsecondary education and training to labor market opportunities by expanding access to programs that lead to high-wage, high-demand careers.** One of the principal barriers to closing gaps between the supply of and demand for talent is that education programs that lead to high-wage, high-demand jobs and careers (for example, engineering, nursing, computer science) typically cost more to deliver than other programs. Institutions that want to expand these programs often cannot afford to. States can address this by offering additional targeted support to increase the capacity of educators to expand enrollment in these programs, ensuring that every learner who is interested in pursuing a pathway to a high-wage, high-demand job is able to do so. Expanded program access, combined with career coaching and mentoring for students and paid work-based learning opportunities to gain applied skills and experience, can help ensure more talent flows to opportunity jobs and other higher-wage, high-demand occupations.

Summary

The findings in this year's State Opportunity Index underscore both the progress made by state leaders and the challenges still facing them. By investing the time and resources needed to strengthen the connection between education and opportunity, many state and institution leaders are contributing to advancing a larger, growing movement to improve postsecondary outcomes.

The Index shows many states making strides on measures to improve outcomes beyond completion. For example, more students report that they've had support in setting education and career goals, developing a plan to achieve them, and identifying and overcoming barriers, three important indicators of Quality Coaching. Additionally, overall participation in work-based learning is growing, including participation in paid internships, which are considered the "gold standard" of work-based learning experiences. In a variety of ways, states are making employment outcomes more transparent to enable informed decision-making about postsecondary education, while leveraging related insights to inform policy and practice. While community college affordability remains relatively strong across almost every state, affordability of four-year institutions still lags.

Although these findings are evidence of the intentional efforts made by state leaders to improve their education and employment systems, there is still room for improvement. For example, only a small number of students report receiving timely information on potential career paths and earnings for their field of study or for students from their institution, both of which are indicators of Quality Coaching. This year's report also shows that many students are not paid for work-based learning — especially clinicals, student teaching, practica, and undergraduate research. Research shows that some students are unable to participate in valuable work-based learning experience because of financial constraints, so making more work-based learning experiences paid would improve access for more learners.

The overall cost and value of postsecondary education is top of mind for students and families. Many students are also not completing their degree on time, and a substantial share of graduates are not securing college-level jobs or earning enough to pay back their debt in the decade after graduating. Persistent challenges related to Affordability, Employer Alignment, and return on investment are among the most difficult for state leaders trying to make improvements that will benefit all learners. But working together toward common goals, state leaders and their partners can support statewide and nationwide changes in the five focus areas that make a difference for students and their families, as well as employers.

In the years to come, we will continue to work toward the goal of connecting education with opportunity. Along the way, we will listen and learn from practitioners and experts; invest and experiment with promising practices and scalable strategies; and measure and refine plans so we keep moving toward that goal. And while we can't yet know what the future holds, we're sure of one thing: it's possible to create a world where every person – no matter where they start – can see the way ahead, and get there. To next-level learning. To a meaningful career. To a life filled with choices and growth. To opportunity.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Endnotes

1. There is greater fluctuation from 2024 to 2025 among states with smaller populations, likely due to the higher margins of error that come with smaller sample sizes. Improvements cited are those that exceed the margin of error.

2. State Opportunity Index, (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2024).

3. In cases in which the margin of error for the survey estimate crossed more than one category, a state is designated as being in a joint category, such as Developing/Advanced.

4. Median wage is calculated from the American Community Survey 2023 five-year estimates and accessed via IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. Net price is accessed through the College Scorecard 2022-23 data, which is calculated from the IPEDS 2022-23 data collection (reflecting the 2021-22 academic year).

5. Net price and on-time completion data are from College Scorecard, which draws from IPEDS data. Students included in the cohort are those who attend full time, are enrolled in college for the first time (not transfer students), and are seeking a degree. Measures of cost are the subset of these students receiving Title IV financial aid.

6. Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Kevin Grubb, and Akua Amankwah-Ayeh. "Internships and Beyond: Strengthening Career Value Across Diverse Models of Work-Based Learning." (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, July 2025). https://www.strada.org/reports/internships-and-beyond

7. Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Elaine Leigh, and Dave Clayton. "The Power of Work-Based Learning." (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, March 2022). 679913b9dd45fb4b42d0a0d8_PV Report Mar 15 2022-small.pdf

   John M. Nunley, Adam Pugh, Nicholas Romero, and R. Alan Seals Jr. "College major, internship experience, and employment opportunities: Estimates from a resume audit." Labour Economics 38, (January 2016): 37–46.

   Jason Jabbari, Yung Chun, Wenrui Huang, and Stephen Roll. "Disaggregating the Effects of STEM Education and Apprenticeships on Economic Mobility: Evidence From the LaunchCode Program." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 47, no. 1 (October 2023): 135-158. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231199985 (Original work published 2025)

   Benjamin F. Blair, Meghan Millea, and Joshua Hammer. "The Impact of Cooperative Education on Academic Performance and Compensation of Engineering Majors." Journal of Engineering Education 93, no. 4 (October 2004): 333–338. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00822.x

8. Sylvia Hurtado, M. Kevin Eagan, Tanya Figueroa, and Bryce E. Hughes. "Reversing underrepresentation: The impact of undergraduate research programs on enrollment in STEM graduate programs." American Educational Research Journal 51, no. 4 (August 2014): 738–777. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1014936#:~:text=ERIC%20%2D%20EJ1014936%20%2D%20Making%20a%20Difference,Educational%20Research%20Journal%2C%202013%2DAug&text=Eagan%2C%20M.,.;%20Garibay%2C%20Juan%20C.&text=To%20increase%20the%20numbers%20of,2%20notes%20and%202%20tables

9. Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Elaine Leigh, and Dave Clayton. "The Power of Work-Based Learning." (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, March 2022). 679913b9dd45fb4b42d0a0d8_PV Report Mar 15 2022-small.pdf

10. "Community College FAQs." (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University). Accessed July 31, 2025, https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community-collegefaqs.html

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