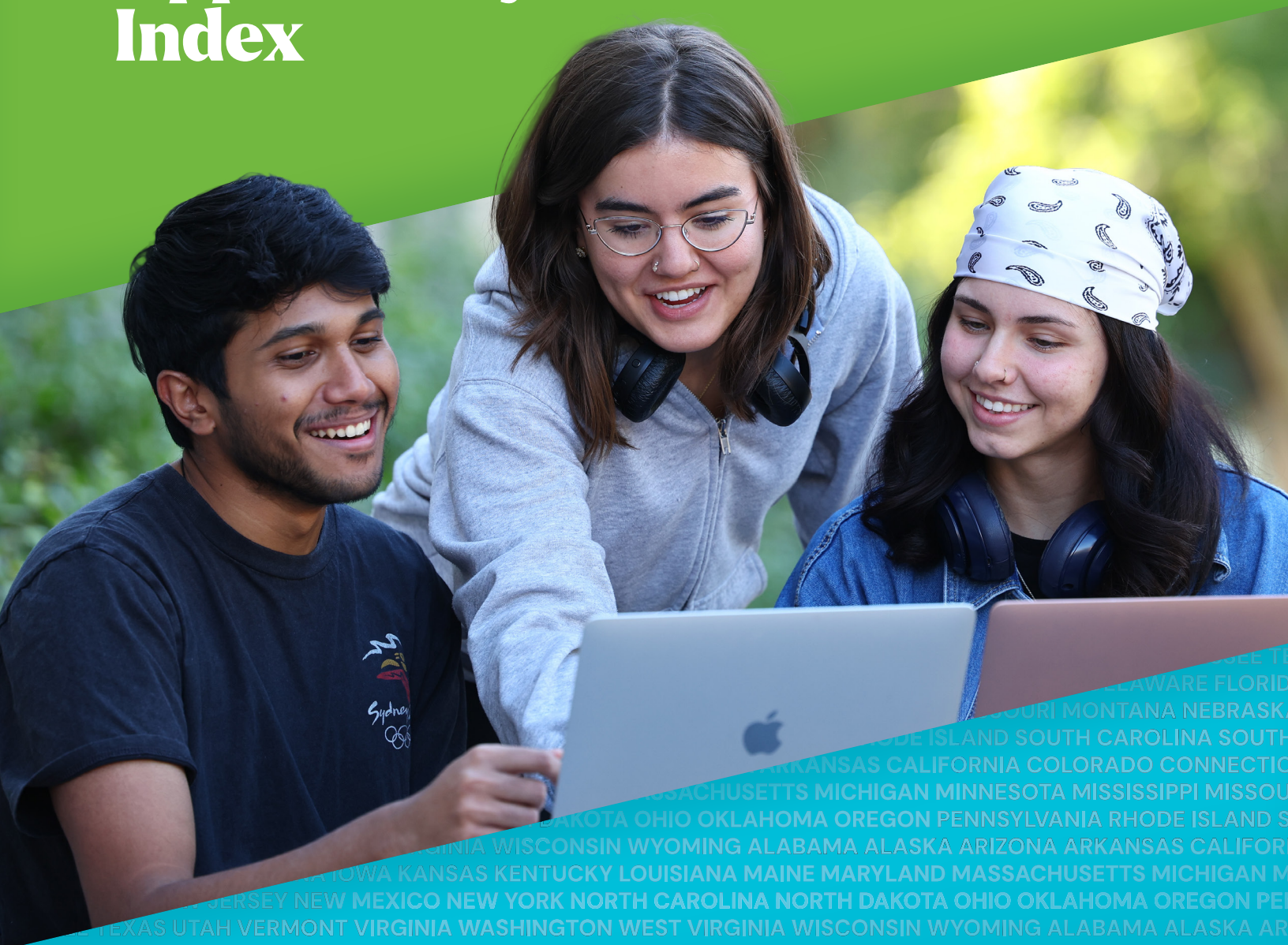
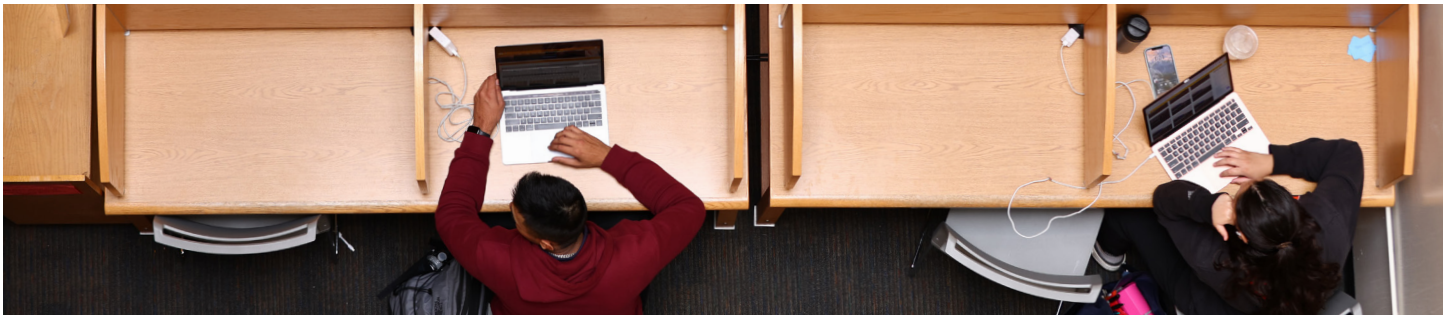
State Opportunity Index



2026 Executive Summary





The 2026 results reveal areas of promise and progress, as well as opportunities for improvement across the states.

- **Clear Outcomes:** Providing accurate information on career and earnings outcomes so learners can make well-informed choices.

  The strong majority of states, 39, are Advanced or Leading in Clear Outcomes, as an integrated education and career data system has become the established norm. Yet most states do not provide insights on occupational outcomes for their graduates.

- **Quality Coaching:** Offering personalized guidance and support so learners can navigate education and career pathways with confidence.

  There is strong positive momentum in providing Quality Coaching, particularly the inclusion of timely labor market information in supporting student choices. The area with the most room for growth is in providing students with data on potential earnings and the outcomes of graduates from their program.

- **Affordability:** Ensuring cost is clear, predictable, and manageable, so that a high-quality education is within every student's reach.

  Nearly every state is Advanced or Leading in Affordability at the associate degree level, while most states are Foundational or Developing at the bachelor's degree level. Through a variety of approaches, a quarter of states improved their category for the Affordability of a bachelor's degree. At the same time, in most states, fewer than half of students complete a bachelor's degree in four years.

- **Work-Based Learning:** Expanding opportunities for paid internships, apprenticeships, and other immersive experiences that connect education to career.

  Four states, up from two last year, are now Advanced in Work-Based Learning, and student participation nationally largely was stable. Further progress could come from converting more unpaid experiences into paid opportunities, given the large number of students who report participating without pay.

- **Employer Alignment:** Ensuring prepared learners can readily access programs that lead to quality jobs and upward financial mobility.

  Although some states improved in Employer Alignment, these gains largely reflected a decline in entry-level job openings rather than increased access to programs aligned with high-wage job openings. College-level employment remains too low in every state, with too many graduates unable to secure work that makes meaningful use of their degree.

Executive Summary

Many Americans pursue a college degree as a path to a better life, seeking both personal growth and preparation for a career that provides economic security and mobility. At the same time, employers look to higher education to provide individuals with the preparation and skills they need to fill high-wage jobs.

Postsecondary education also is associated with meaningful non-economic benefits, such as improved health and well-being, but these advantages are difficult to realize fully for graduates who do not experience a positive return on investment (ROI). Nationally about 70 percent of graduates of public higher education institutions are estimated to secure a positive ROI within 10 years of completion, ranging from 48 to 80 percent across the states and degree types. While most graduates experience a positive ROI, these results show that every state has room to strengthen employment outcomes.





The State Opportunity Index offers a framework to help policymakers, higher education system leaders, and institutions strengthen the link between education and opportunity. The Index centers on five research-backed keys to improve outcomes for learners and employers alike. For each of these focus areas, state progress is categorized in one of four levels.

FOUNDATIONAL
State is just beginning its journey

DEVELOPING
State is in the early stages of improvement

ADVANCED
State has made substantial progress

LEADING
State is at the forefront, demonstrating strong progress



Clear Outcomes

Robust education-to-employment data infrastructure illuminates the outcomes of different education pathways, providing actionable information for students, families, institutions, and states. The states that fully invest in harnessing the power of education-to-career data systems include the full spectrum of credentials earned beyond high school, connect each pathway to employment outcomes, and ensure timely insights from the data inform the efforts of policymakers, education and business leaders, researchers, and the public.

- The vast majority of states are relatively strong in their education-to-employment data infrastructure, enabling them to provide accurate information on career and earnings outcomes, with 17 Leading and 22 Advanced.
- The most widespread strengths across states are integrating employment outcomes with postsecondary education data, partnering to access earnings outcomes for graduates who leave the state, and creating public-facing interactive resources.
- The areas where most states have room for growth are giving learners a trusted record of their education and work achievements, publishing downloadable education-to-career outcomes statistics, and implementing enhanced wage records to enable clearer understanding of the occupations, locations, and pay rates of graduates for each program of study.



Quality Coaching

Students face many key decision points on their education-to-career journey, including choosing where to enroll, what to study, and which cocurricular experiences are most valuable for them to pursue. When students have timely information, personalized guidance, and support to make plans and overcome challenges, they are better able to prepare for success in a career that aligns with their strengths and interests.

- There is growing national momentum at bachelor's degree institutions in providing students with education-to-career coaching and guidance, with five states now Advanced: Alabama, Delaware, Indiana, Kansas, and South Carolina. This is up from no states in this category last year, and, for the first time, no states are categorized as Foundational.
- Quality Coaching at the associate degree level continues to be stable and more widespread than at the bachelor's degree level, with 17 states Advanced and no states Foundational.
- States made the most progress on providing students with labor market information, with 31 states at the bachelor's degree level and two states at the associate degree level improving on this element.



Affordability

Cost considerations are a key factor in students' decisions to enroll in college and their ability to persist and complete a degree – especially for learners from families with lower and middle incomes. In addition, time to completion is a critical factor that contributes to the total cost of education – both through additional tuition and forgone earnings – and must be accounted for.

Affordability *(continued)*

- There has been notable progress in Affordability at bachelor's degree institutions, with 13 states moving into a higher performance category. Fifteen states are now Leading or Advanced; however, most states remain in the Developing or Foundational categories.
- Progress at the bachelor's degree level has come through improvements in on-time completion (eight states) and reductions in the hours of work needed to cover net price for the average student (13 states) and the average low-income student (10 states).
- Affordability continues to be strong at the associate degree level, with 35 states Leading and another 13 Advanced; for the first time no states are Foundational at the associate degree level.



Work-Based Learning

Paid work-based learning experiences, including internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, practica, and undergraduate research experience, are instrumental in improving post-graduation career outcomes. The benefits include greater likelihood of securing a college-level job, gaining access to high-demand fields, earning more, and being satisfied with a career path.

- Consistent with last year, 43 percent of graduating seniors at the nation's public bachelor's degree institutions report having had at least one of five immersive paid work-based learning experiences: internship, co-op, practicum or student teaching, undergraduate research, and apprenticeship.
- In the strongest states – Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, and Virginia – the majority of seniors report participation in paid work-based learning.
- Looking at students enrolled at associate degree institutions, 14 percent reported having had one of the five immersive paid work-based learning experiences, a slight decline.



Employer Alignment

Students who invest their time and resources in higher education expect to graduate with improved career opportunities and outcomes, while states expect that investing in higher education will create the talent needed to address state economic needs. Each state's progress in Employer Alignment rests on the confluence of these two elements: college-level employment rates of recent graduates and supply-demand ratios for key high-wage occupational groups.

- There have been gains in Employer Alignment overall, with 13 states moving to a higher category. Four states, California, Mississippi, Rhode Island, and Utah, plus the District of Columbia, are now Advanced.
- College-level employment for recent bachelor's degree graduates remained stable, and is highest in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. At the same time, college-level employment remains too low in every state, with too many graduates unable to secure work that makes full use of their degree.
- Supply-demand ratios in a set of high-wage opportunity jobs rose across the board due to a decrease in entry-level openings, rather than an increase in the supply of graduates from aligned programs.

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

While there is still much room to strengthen the connection between education and opportunity, there is progress in every state.

Notably, we see states:

- **Building robust data infrastructure and analytical capacity to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, workforce leaders, employers, and learners.** These efforts include collecting enhanced wage records, tracking outcomes of noncredit programs, creating learner-owned and broadly recognized records of learning and employment, publishing open aggregate outcomes data, participating in the Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes Coalition, and investing in dedicated analytical capacity to support well-informed choices about postsecondary education.
- **Embedding guidance, labor market information, and support into universal student experiences, and extending the reach of coaching.** Institutions are infusing career exploration and guidance into orientation, other first-year experiences, and academic pathways, while equipping faculty to support career readiness. Some emerging practices include building coordinated coaching systems across K-12, postsecondary education, workforce, and community partners and using technology to expand access.
- **Reducing costs and shortening time to completion.** States are making affordability gains via a variety of strategies, including holding tuition flat, better targeting need-based aid, offering community college bachelor's degrees or accelerated bachelor's degrees, designing dual enrollment and credit for prior learning solutions that will reduce time to completion, and ensuring clear pathways and supportive advising to reduce wasted credits.
- **Setting statewide goals and building supportive infrastructure to expand access to paid work-based learning experiences.** States are laying the groundwork by creating common definitions and systems for gathering data on work-based learning participation, investing in employer intermediary organizations, and creating models to pay students for participation in practicum settings that historically have been unpaid.
- **Ensuring statewide and regional talent strategies are responsive, collaborative, and data-informed.** A few states are beginning to integrate strategic plans for K-12, higher education, economic development, and workforce development, and creating a unified analytical staff capacity to produce strategic insights across these different sectors to inform policy, program, and investment decisions. A few states are expanding pathways in fields that prepare graduates to fill persistent talent shortages, via funding high-demand programs based on actual costs and/or by providing targeted incentives through state funding formulas.



The State Opportunity Index is designed to reflect the best available data and the real progress states and institutions are making nationwide. Updated each year, it is a shared resource. We welcome your feedback and partnership so we can continue learning and improving together and help more students experience the full promise of postsecondary education.

If we get this right, here's what the future could look like: A young person or adult explores options with a career coach. They have data on jobs and earnings by program. They know costs up front, and public options are affordable and accessible. They engage in paid work-based learning, building skills and clarifying goals. By completion, they don't just hold a credential (or a few). They have a good job, experience, and momentum toward a better future.

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