State Opportunity Index

2026

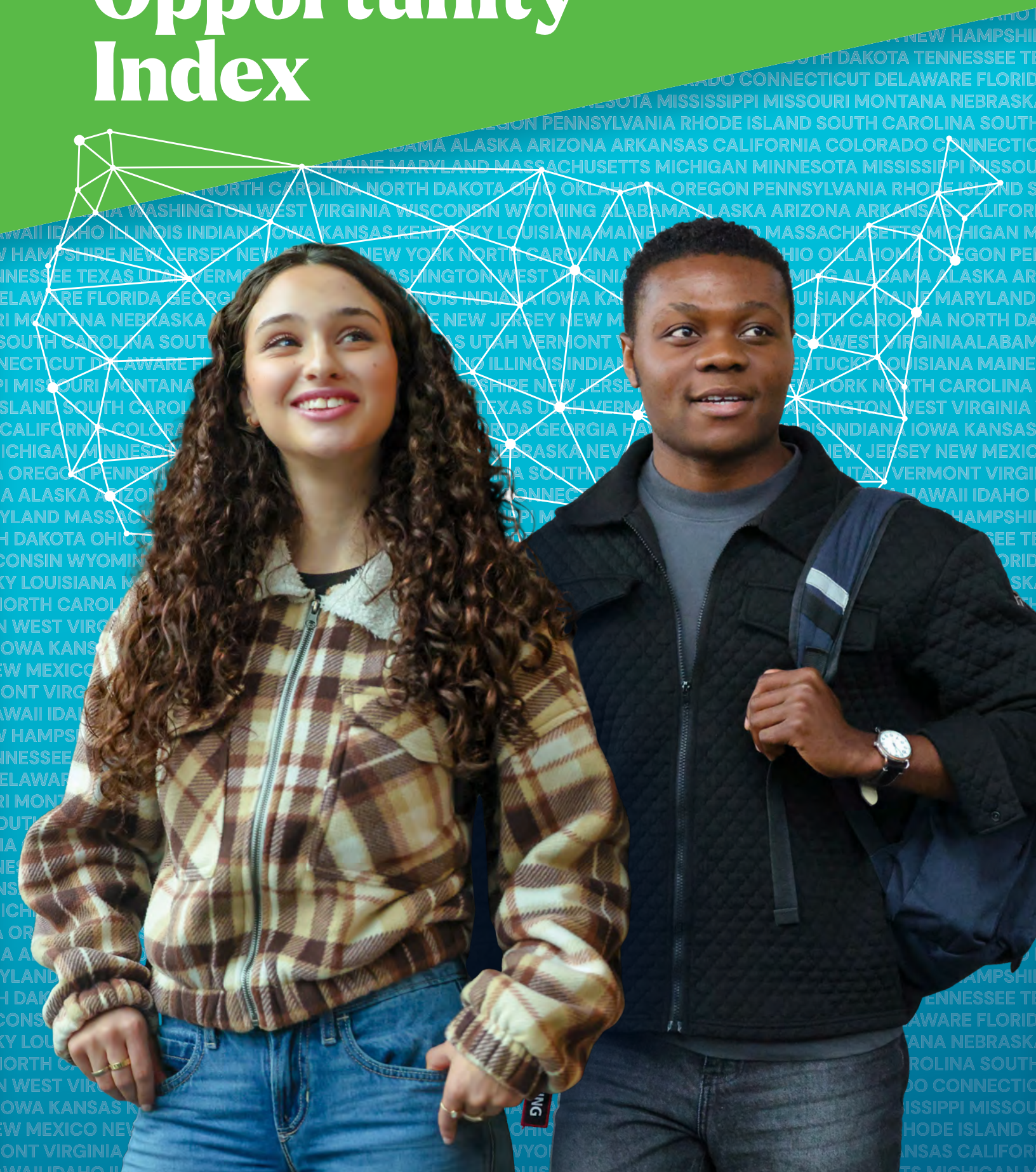




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5 Keys to Success Beyond Completion

Postsecondary education offers one of the surest pathways to opportunity in America, but completion alone does not guarantee success. Success beyond completion means that graduates consistently secure meaningful work, achieve economic security and mobility, and experience a positive return on their investment. Policymakers and institutional leaders can greatly improve outcomes for learners by advancing the five keys described on the next page. Together, these five research-backed keys also strengthen talent pipelines for employers and fuel growth in regions and states, delivering benefits for learners, employers, and communities alike.

	Benefits for Learners	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 for 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 postsecondary education is within everyone's reach, with clear, predictable, and manageable costs.	✓ 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 economic mobility, and employers assess and advance individuals based on skills and experience, 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

The State Opportunity Index provides both a framework for progress and an examination of how effectively states are connecting education to opportunity. Ensuring every student, especially those who face the greatest barriers, will be better off because of their investment in postsecondary education requires powerful solutions. Such solutions pay multi-faceted dividends to individuals, households, communities, economies, and states. It is clear that leaders in every state aspire to strengthen the connections between education and opportunity. The Index identifies where they are making progress — and shows us all where to look for continued improvement.



This annual report is designed to support improved solutions by enabling leaders in each state to see their current status and progress, and find relevant insights through their peers in other states. The progress of each state is categorized on five keys to improve post-completion education success for all:

- **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:** Ensuring cost is clear, predictable, and manageable, so that a high-quality education is within every student's reach.
- **Work-Based Learning:** Expanding opportunities for paid internships, apprenticeships, and other immersive experiences that connect education to career.
- **Employer Alignment:** Ensuring prepared learners can readily access programs that lead to quality jobs and upward financial mobility.

The Index benchmarks progress across 50 states and the District of Columbia in each of these five areas, highlighting both advances and areas for improvement.

For each of these key areas, state progress is categorized in one of four levels.

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

- 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 still do not provide insights on occupational outcomes for their graduates.
- There is emerging momentum in providing Quality Coaching, particularly the inclusion of timely labor market information in supporting student choices. As this momentum continues to build, the area with the most room for growth is providing students with clear data on potential earnings and the outcomes of graduates from their program.
- 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.
- Four states, up from two last year, are now Advanced in Work-Based Learning at bachelor's degree institutions, and student participation nationally largely was stable. Converting more unpaid experiences into paid opportunities is an area for progress, given the large number of students who report participating without pay.
- 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.

This year's State Opportunity Index demonstrates that states are making progress in these five key areas. It also highlights the importance of ongoing collaborations within, and across, states to build the enduring solutions that will deliver opportunity for all.

Methodology Note: The 2026 results for Quality Coaching and Work-Based Learning are based on a rolling average of student survey responses collected in 2025 and 2026. This approach, similar to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey's use of multi-year estimates, increases sample size, allowing for more precise and stable state estimates. This year's report includes results for 49 states at the bachelor's degree level and 42 states at the associate degree level. If your state is not yet represented, or if your institution did not participate directly and you are interested in participating in 2027, please contact stradaresearch@strada.org.

Positive Return on Investment

Results Overview

- The estimated portion of public college graduates in each state who experience a positive return on their investment (ROI) within 10 years remained stable from 2025 to 2026: 70 percent for all degree holders, 73 percent for bachelor's, 60 percent for associate.
- These percentages vary across states. At the bachelor's degree level, positive ROI ranges from 52 to 80 percent and at the associate degree level, positive ROI ranges from 48 to 75 percent across states.
- Black and Latino bachelor's degree holders and female Black and Latina associate degree holders are less likely than other degree holders to experience positive ROI, though the majority still do.

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 doesn't always guarantee 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 estimated percentage of associate and bachelor's degree graduates in each state for whom college economically pays off within a decade.

Estimating the portion of graduates with a positive ROI is not intended to suggest that the value of postsecondary education can be assessed only 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 key 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

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Positive ROI appendix.

Positive return on investment is measured by the percent of degree holders in each state with a high enough earnings premium to cover the total cost of their education within 10 years. The earnings premium is the difference between each degree holder's annual income and the median earnings of workers of the same age in their state with only a high school diploma.

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. The analysis focuses on graduates for whom their bachelor's degree or associate degree is their highest credential.

Findings

This year's results are identical to last year's at the national level: 70 percent of recent graduates of all public institutions are estimated to experience a positive return on investment within 10 years. California, Maine, Michigan, and New Hampshire made statistically significant improvements in the overall likelihood that recent graduates would achieve a positive ROI.

- At least 75 percent of recent bachelor's degree graduates in eight states are estimated to cross the 10-year positive ROI threshold: California, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Washington.
- Sixty percent or fewer recent bachelor's degree graduates are estimated to cross the threshold in three states: Iowa, North Dakota, and Wyoming.
- At least 70 percent of recent associate degree graduates in three states are estimated to cross the 10-year positive ROI threshold: Alaska, Maine, and Vermont.
- Fifty percent or fewer recent associate degree graduates are estimated to cross the threshold in two states: Colorado and North Dakota.

In 2026, recent bachelor's degree graduates who earn an average of at least $57,000 per year over the first 10 years would experience a positive ROI in every state (the minimum needed for any state is $44,000 in Florida). An associate degree graduate would need to earn anywhere from $39,000 per year in Alabama to $51,000 in Massachusetts and Washington state to cross this threshold.

In addition to geographic differences, variations by race, ethnicity, and sex are apparent. When comparing the earnings of bachelor's degree holders to those of their peers of the same race/ethnicity, sex, age, and state with only a high school diploma:

- Black and Latino bachelor's degree holders are less likely than bachelor's degree holders of other races and ethnicities to experience a positive return on investment (though more than two-thirds still do).
- Differences by sex are more complex: while female bachelor's degree holders earn less than their male counterparts, they are about as likely, or even more likely, to experience a positive ROI since the pay gap for females with only a high school diploma is larger than the pay gap between sexes at the bachelor's degree level.

Figure 1:
Percentage of graduates with Positive 10-year ROI by state - all degrees

40% 80%

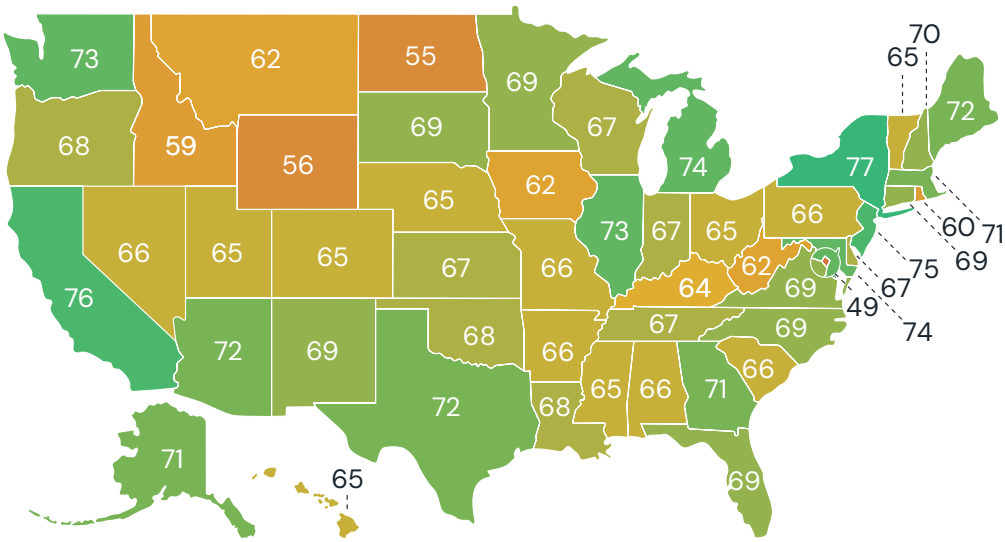


Figure 2:
Percentage of graduates with Positive 10-year ROI by state - bachelor's degrees

40% 80%

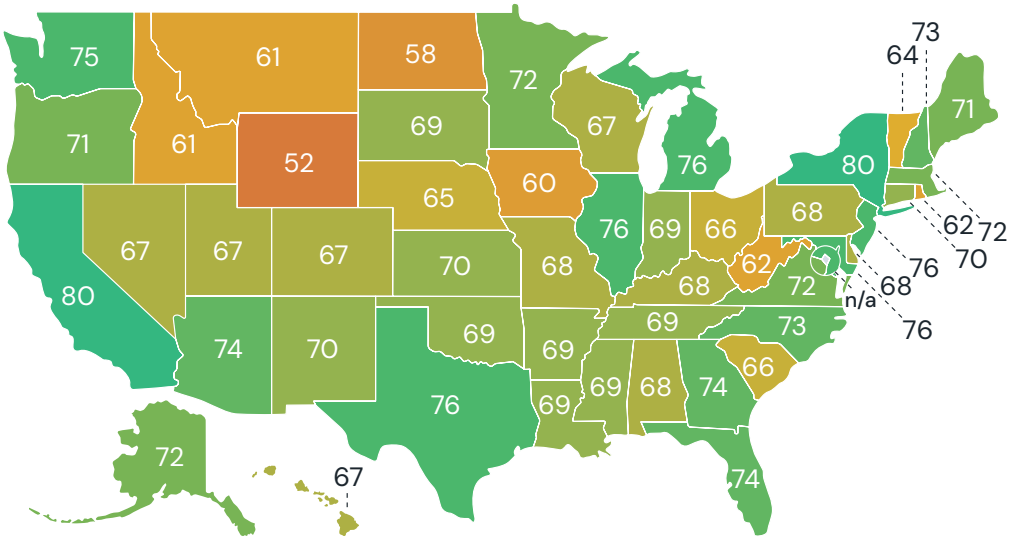


Figure 3:
Percentage of graduates with Positive 10-year ROI by state - associate degrees

40% 80%

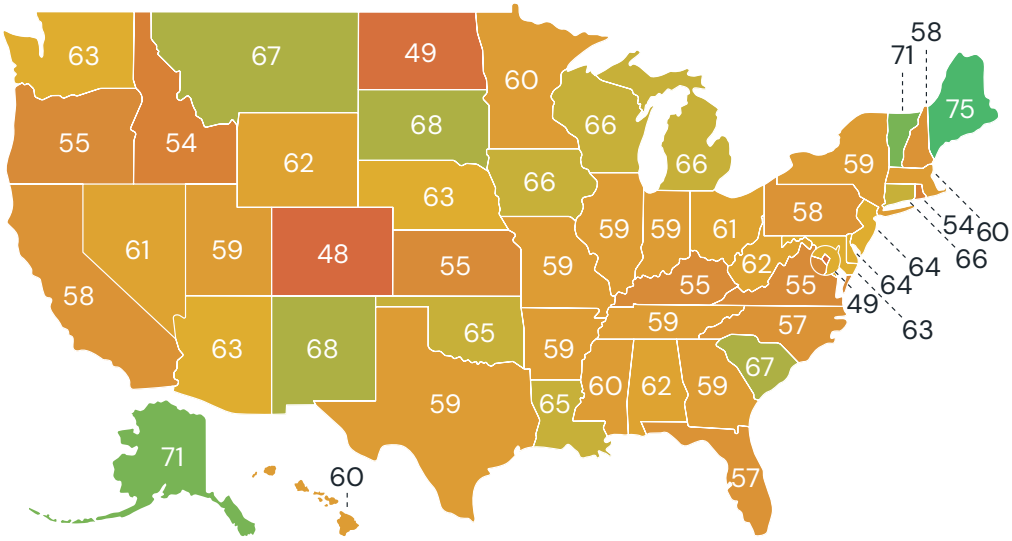


Figure 4: Percentage of graduates with a positive 10-year Positive ROI by race/ethnicity and sex - bachelor's degrees

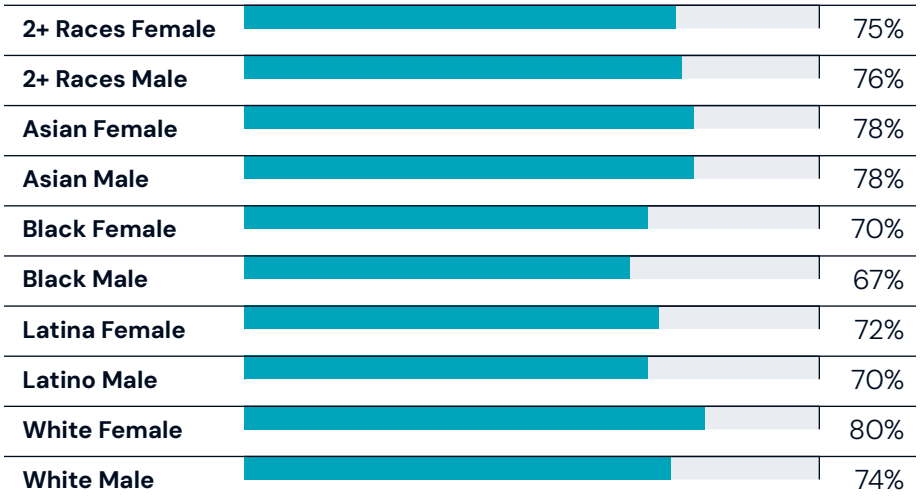
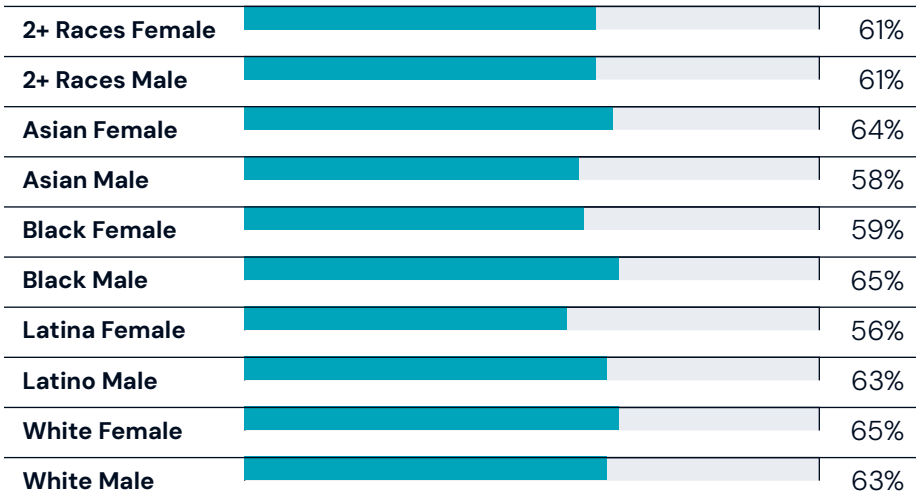


Figure 5: Percentage of graduates with a positive 10-year Positive ROI by race/ethnicity and sex - associate degrees



The likelihood of a positive ROI for associate degree holders is more even across race/ethnicity and sex, though Asian males and Black or Latina females with associate degrees are still somewhat less likely than their peers to experience positive return on investment.

Ultimately, positive ROI is driven by two parts of an equation: cost and earnings. Making education more affordable addresses the cost aspect, while robust data on outcomes, personalized career advising, work-based learning experiences, and pathways strongly aligned with labor market demand all can help ensure a stronger and more consistent return for students. Each state seeking to improve positive return on investment will need to consider the approach to change that is the best fit for its circumstances.

The following chapters in this report provide state-by-state benchmarks on these key strategies to improve career outcomes and affordability for students, the two parts of the equation for positive ROI.





Clear Outcomes

Results Overview

- 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.

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 also are 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

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Clear Outcomes appendix.

The Clear Outcomes indicator is based on 10 elements that characterize state progress on the capacity and utilization of their education-to-employment data infrastructure.[1] Each element is rated on a 1-4 scale, and the average of the 10 element scores provides each state's overall Clear Outcomes categorization. The ratings are based on a review of publicly available information and self-reported responses from state agency staff. Each state was invited to review the initial categorization and submit clarifying information before results were finalized.

The scores for each of the 10 elements are then averaged together and states are categorized into one of four levels of overall progress:

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



Figure 6: Ten key elements of state education-to-employment data systems

State Data System Elements

Across the elements, information should be collected, integrated, and provided to allow disaggregation by institution, credential, program, race/ethnicity, gender, and family income/economic status.

COLLECT	1. Accumulates data for nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs
	2. Includes occupation, pay rate, and work location in wage record collections
INTEGRATE	3. Integrates earnings, employment, postsecondary education, and training outcomes
	4. Integrates earnings, employment, and high school data
	5. Assesses postsecondary education training outcomes for those who relocate or work outside the state
PROVIDE	6. Provides open data files containing aggregate education-to-employment statistics
	7. Publishes interactive resources informing education-to-employment decision-making
	8. Affords researchers with access to individual-level matched education-to-employment datasets
IMPACT	9. Enables learners to access and utilize their own verified education and employment data
	10. Designates unit with responsibility for generating education-to-employment insights

Findings

Many states are in a relatively strong position when it comes to Clear Outcomes, with 17 Leading, 22 Advanced, 10 Developing, and only two Foundational. Most states are demonstrating the ability to integrate employment outcomes with postsecondary data, share data across state lines, and provide interactive resources to make these outcomes data publicly accessible. All but four states integrate records from at least their public four-year institutions and community colleges with administrative employment and earnings data, and more than 1,000 institutions across 40 states now participate in the U.S. Census Bureau's Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) project, which allows them to track the earnings of their graduates across state lines.

Over the past year, five states — Arizona, Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas, and Vermont — improved their overall category. Five states declined from the Leading to the Advanced category (Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Nebraska, and Utah). The states that improved were most likely to have made progress on integrating earnings and employment outcomes with postsecondary education data (element 3), integrating earnings and employment outcomes with high school data (element 4), and strengthening capacity to generate education-to-employment insights (element 10).

Verified data for learning mobility (element 9) had the most widespread progress, with 13 states improving over where they were a year ago and only one state declining, even as this remains the area where states are least likely to be Leading or Advanced. Integrating data from high school through entry into the workforce (element 4) also saw broad progress, with 10 states improving their category and only two declining.

Figure 7: Clear Outcomes, by state

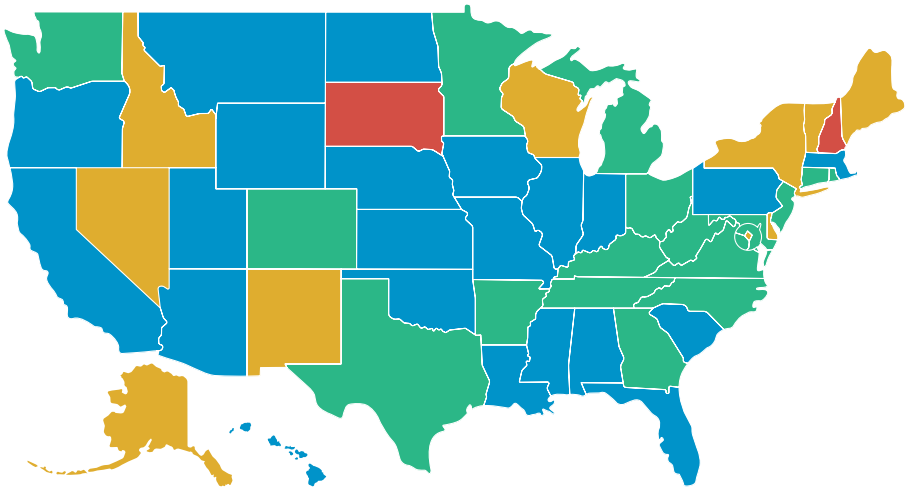


Figure 8: Ten key elements, by year

COLLECT

1. **Nondegree and noncredit data**



2. **Enhanced wage records**



INTEGRATE

3. **Integrating post-high school education and employment data**



4. **Integrating high school completion and employment data**



5. **Partnerships for outcomes data outside the state**



PROVIDE

6. **Open aggregate data**



7. **Interactive resources**

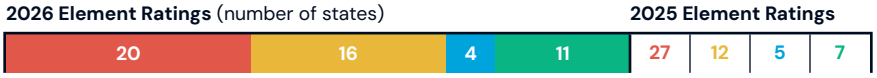


8. **Researcher access**



IMPACT

9. **Verified data for learning mobility**



10. **Unit for generating education-to-employment insights**



Pathways to Progress

Overall, states have established solid groundwork for their education-to-employment data infrastructure, with 39 states at Leading or Advanced overall. Across the spectrum of the 10 specific elements, there are seven elements in which more than 30 states are categorized as Leading or Advanced. The remaining three, enhanced wage records, open aggregate data, and verified data for learning mobility, have more variation in progress across the states. Importantly, no state is categorized as Leading in all 10 elements and neither is any state Foundational in all of them. The vast majority of states are making progress and every state has opportunities to continue to improve.

Looking across this landscape, it is clear that states are taking advantage of the strategic opportunities that go along with a stronger education-to-career data infrastructure.

Building robust data infrastructure and analytical capacity to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, workforce leaders, employers, and learners.

Workforce Pell requires assessment of occupational alignment and other employment outcomes for nondegree programs. Laying the groundwork for collecting these data – via enhanced wage records – is enabling several states to understand better the occupational pathways for all of their graduates.

Similarly, tracking noncredit programs for Workforce Pell reporting purposes helps states to create and strengthen systems for capturing information on a broader array of noncredit, short-term programs. Most states have existing noncredit data collections on which to build.

Anticipating a greater need for trusted and universally recognized records of workforce credentials.

A number of states have taken strides toward creating learner-owned records of learning and employment that facilitate recognition by colleges and universities as well as employers. Examples of this progress can be found in states participating in the National Learning Mobility Collaborative and the Connecting Talent to Opportunity Challenge.

Moving beyond compliance-related reporting to strategic insight generation.

Roughly half of states publish aggregate education-to-employment datasets that are publicly available for anyone to download. Publishing these data in commonly used, nonproprietary, open formats along with metadata and other documentation can support broad stakeholder use and improve the accuracy and reliability of artificial intelligence-generated outputs.

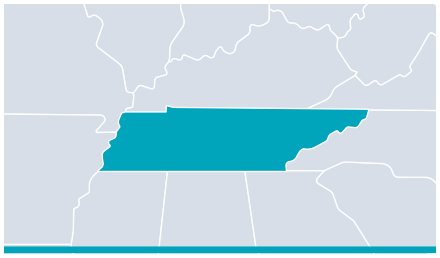
Most states now participate in the PSEO Coalition, which provides states with a much more complete picture of employment and earnings outcomes for certificate and degree recipients by including graduates who cross state lines.

Many states are investing in their capacity to produce education-to-employment insights. This insight-generation capacity enables a fuller understanding of which programs are leading to the strongest outcomes for learners and where there might be opportunities for program expansion through Workforce Pell or state funding streams.

States to Watch



Ohio is expanding transparency into nondegree pathways by connecting college-issued noncredit credentials, occupational licenses, and industry credentials to employment and earnings outcomes. In 2026, the state began publishing outcomes for noncredit credentials through its Workforce Success Measures' Ohio Technical Centers dashboard and also publishes outcomes for occupational licenses and industry certifications through the Ohio Education Research Center.



Tennessee connects employment and earnings data with records spanning high schools, community colleges, and public and private four-year institutions, and makes these outcomes publicly available via open datasets and the Office of Evidence and Impact's Education to Employment dashboard. In 2026, the state expanded the dashboard to allow users to examine employment outcomes by race/ethnicity and gender.



Washington is leveraging enhanced wage records to provide richer insight into where learners work after leaving postsecondary education. Using occupation and hours-worked data, researchers have examined the occupational destinations of learners in fields including construction apprenticeships, business, and nursing, with findings published in a series of research briefs.



West Virginia is building a statewide infrastructure for learning mobility through the West Virginia Collaborative to Advance Learning Mobility (WV CALM), helping learners move across institutions, stack credentials, and navigate career transitions. The effort includes a common microcredential quality framework, statewide microcredential data collection, and expanded institutional microcredential offerings.



Quality Coaching

Results Overview

- 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.

Students face many key decision points on their education-to-career journey, including choosing whether and 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.

Measurement

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Quality Coaching appendix.

The results reported here are based on more than 110,000 responses from a nationally representative survey of postsecondary students at public colleges and universities. State results also are representative of their respective publicly enrolled student populations. Bachelor's degree results are based on responses from graduating seniors, while associate degree results are based on the currently enrolled population, excluding dual-enrollment students. The 2026 results are based on a rolling average of survey responses collected in 2025 and 2026. Combining two years of data produces more precise and stable state estimates, particularly for states with smaller populations, similar to the U.S. Census American Community Survey's use of multi-year estimates.

These self-reported survey data capture the extent to which students perceive they experienced the elements of Quality Coaching, namely:

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

A state's progress on each of the three elements is scored — one, two, three, or four — according to the percentage of their students who report experiencing personalized guidance, timely labor market information, and support as follows:

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

The scores for each of the three elements are then averaged together and states are categorized into one of four levels of overall progress:

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

Taken together, these three dimensions reflect the core components of students' reported Quality Coaching experiences and provide a common framework for comparing education-to-career guidance across states and institutions.

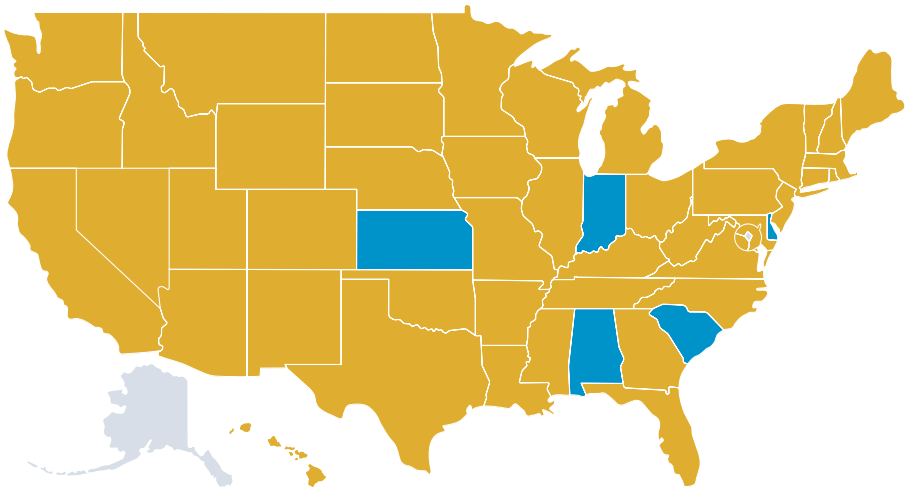
Findings

Quality Coaching at public bachelor's degree institutions

For bachelor's degree-granting institutions, eight states improved their Quality Coaching category from one year ago. Five of those states, Alabama, Delaware, Indiana, Kansas, and South Carolina, are now Advanced. This is encouraging, as there were no Advanced states in 2025. Three additional states also made improvements, moving from Foundational to Developing: California, Massachusetts, and Washington. For the first time since data collection began in 2023, no states are in the Foundational category. In addition, 10 states that were not reported on in 2025 now have sufficient data to report; the only places not reported at the bachelor's degree level are Alaska and the District of Columbia.

Figure 9: Quality Coaching at public bachelor's degree institutions, by state

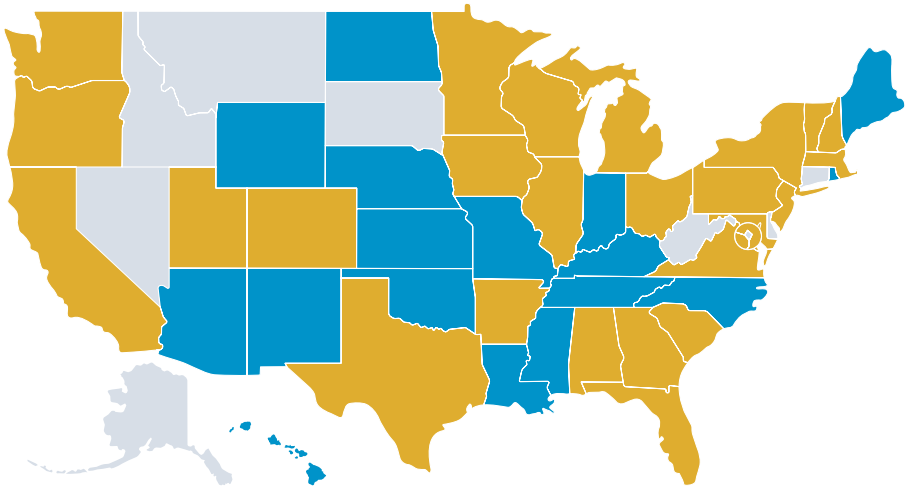
Insufficient data to report at this time



FOUNDATIONAL	DEVELOPING	ADVANCED	LEADING
0 states	44 states	5 states	0 states

Figure 10: Quality Coaching at public associate degree institutions, by state

Insufficient data to report at this time



FOUNDATIONAL	DEVELOPING	ADVANCED	LEADING
0 states	25 states	17 states	0 states

Figure 11: Elements of Quality Coaching at public bachelor's degree institutions, by state

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

Note: States that are not included did not have sufficient data to report this year.

Figure 12: Elements of Quality Coaching at public associate degree institutions, by state

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

Note: States that are not included did not have sufficient data to report this year.

Across the three elements of Quality Coaching:

- Timely labor market information was the element in which progress was most widespread for states. Thirty-one states improved on this element and none declined.
- Four states improved on providing personalized guidance, while three declined.
- Five states improved on support and five declined.

The progress on student experiences with timely labor market information element was led by increases in receiving information on career pathways aligned with their strengths and interests, followed by information on job opportunities in a field of study. Experiences providing information on potential earnings and on the career outcomes of alumni from their program were less common.

Every state remained strong – at least Advanced – on support. Experiences with personalized guidance were mixed across states.

Figure 13 shows the states that improved their overall category and how each specific element of coaching compares to 2025.

Figure 13: Changes in elements of quality coaching for states that increased their bachelor's degree Quality Coaching category

↑ Improved
↓ Declined
= Stayed the same

State	Category	Timely information	Personalized guidance	Support
AL	Advanced	↑	=	↑
CA	Developing	=	↑	=
DE	Advanced	↑	=	=
IN	Advanced	↑	=	↑
KS	Advanced	↑	↓	↑
MA	Developing	↑	=	=
SC	Advanced	↑	=	=
WA	Developing	↑	=	=

Quality Coaching at public associate degree institutions

Similar to 2025, many more states are Advanced in Quality Coaching at the associate degree level than at the bachelor's degree level. At the associate degree level, 17 states are Advanced, 25 are Developing, and the remainder have insufficient responses to report on at this time. No states are Leading or Foundational. Two states, Louisiana and Tennessee, improved their Quality Coaching category, while seven states moved down (California, Florida, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina).

Across the three elements of Quality Coaching:

- Two states improved on timely information and none declined.
- Two states improved on providing personalized guidance, while nine declined.
- No states improved on support and seven declined.

For timely labor market information, the weakest element, only one state – North Dakota – has surpassed the Developing level, while all other states are Developing or Foundational/Developing. Nevertheless, students at associate degree institutions still are more likely than those at bachelor's degree institutions to receive timely labor market information. Students are most likely to receive information on career pathways aligned with their strengths and interests, followed by information on job opportunities in a field of study, and less likely to receive information on potential earnings and on the career outcomes of alumni from their program.

Support is still the element on which states are strongest, with every state at least at the Advanced level. For personalized guidance, states are clustered at the Developing or Developing/Advanced level.

Figure 14 shows the states that improved their overall category and how each specific element of coaching compares to 2025.

Figure 14: Changes in elements of quality coaching for states that increased their associate degree Quality Coaching category

↑ Improved
↓ Declined
= Stayed the same

State	Category	Timely information	Personalized guidance	Support
LA	Advanced	=	↑	=
TN	Advanced	=	↑	=



Pathways to Progress

Overall, the results paint an encouraging picture of progress and national momentum at the bachelor's degree level and sustained performance at the associate degree level. This year also provided a more complete picture of Quality Coaching, with results available for far more states compared to 2025. States maintained their strength in providing students with support, and many states improved in ensuring students access to timely labor market information.

As students report having these Quality Coaching experiences through the survey, we observe many intentional policy and practice efforts across states to continue to strengthen education-to-career guidance.

Integrating labor market information and outcomes data into multiple student experiences and platforms.

Institutions in a growing number of states are making labor market information and outcomes data available to students through both self-serve and guided experiences. Faculty and advisors are increasing their capabilities to interpret and discuss labor market information with students to better support their choices about education-to-career pathways.

Ensuring students experience career guidance early and at key milestones.

Institutions in many states are infusing career exploration and guidance into orientation, extending career readiness activities throughout the first year, and including them in experiences such as cocurricular activities, learning communities, and first-year experience courses. Colleges and universities are embedding career guidance into required courses and providing faculty with training, shared tools, and examples to facilitate and incentivize faculty engagement in career readiness. This guidance can guide students' course selection and help them in securing relevant paid work-based learning to gain experience in their chosen career path.

Ensuring learners have timely guidance about selecting career pathways at crucial decision points.

Many states are integrating guidance on post-high school paths into their advising systems and several states are investing in guidance for adults looking to transition to a new career field to help them explore purposeful postsecondary pathways and navigate key decisions about education, employment, or military service. These efforts bring together secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, workforce partners, employers, and community organizations to support informed decision-making and successful transitions for learners.

Combining human-centered and technology-enabled coaching.

When thoughtfully integrated, technology extends the reach of advisors and coaches, addresses growing caseload pressures, and creates new opportunities for personalized exploration and engagement at scale. While institutions in most states offer tech-enabled career exploration and advising support, relatively few have integrated approaches that seamlessly blend technology-enabled and human coaching.

States to Watch



The **Louisiana** Workforce Commission's task force is dedicated to building a seamless education-to-career ecosystem by integrating localized coaching, industry-aligned training, and cross-agency data to ensure students and job seekers can navigate direct pathways into high-growth sectors.



The **Indiana** Department of Education is expanding student access to personalized career guidance by administering millions in state grants to schools and intermediaries, facilitating mandatory "Career Discovery Meetings" for upperclassmen, and implementing a comprehensive K-12 framework that aligns student "agilities" with high-demand workforce pathways.



North Carolina is building statewide advising infrastructure through Advise NC, which places college advisers in high-need regions in partnership with University of North Carolina institutions and other organizations. In 2026, the state committed $5 million to the initiative, matched by non-state funds, to expand access to guidance that helps students navigate the transition to postsecondary education.



City University of New York is leveraging faculty to make career guidance part of the everyday student experience. Through CUNY Beyond and its Career Success Fellows, faculty embed career-relevant information into courses and serve as champions who help other faculty do the same, while career exploration also is being integrated into first-year seminars. The university plans to scale CUNY Beyond across all 19 undergraduate campuses by 2030.



Affordability

Results Overview

- 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.

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.

Looking at a student's ability to cover their cost of attendance through work is a lens that puts cost in terms that matter for students and allows for better comparability across states than prices alone. 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.

Measurement

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

The student Affordability indicator is based upon three elements:

1. The number of hours the average state resident student would need to work to cover the annual net price at a public institution in each state.
2. The number of hours a student from the lowest income group would need to work to cover the annual net price at a public institution in each state.
3. The percentage of bachelor's degree students completing their degree on time.

Hours of work needed are calculated by dividing the weighted average annual net price by college students' median wage earned in each state.[2] Annual net price includes in-state tuition, fees, books, supplies, and living expenses — minus all grants and scholarship awards.[3] 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.

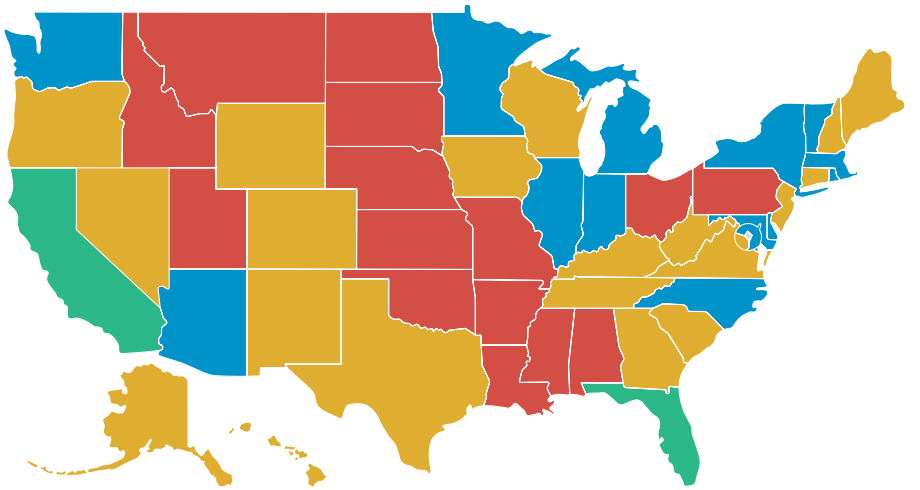
The final element is timely completion. This is measured as the percentage of students attending bachelor's degree institutions who complete a degree in four years or less. On-time completion for students attending associate degree institutions is not included in the metric as full-time attendance does not reflect the experience of most community college students.

Findings

Affordability of public bachelor's degree institutions

California moved up to join Florida as one of two Leading states for Affordability at bachelor's degree institutions, eight states moved up into the Advanced category, and four states moved out of Foundational into Developing. Three states slipped at the bachelor's degree level: Alaska, Utah, and Wyoming. In all, there are now two Leading states, 13 Advanced states, 20 Developing states, and 15 Foundational states at the bachelor's degree level.[4] States that improved took a variety of paths, as seen in Figure 17.

Figure 15: Affordability of public bachelor's degree institutions, by state



FOUNDATIONAL	DEVELOPING	ADVANCED	LEADING
15 states	20 states	13 states	2 states

Figure 16: Elements of Affordability, by state

State	Hours of Work Needed		Low-Income Hours of Work Needed		On-Time Completion
	Bachelor's	Associate	Bachelor's	Associate	Bachelor's
AL	Foundational	Advanced	Foundational	Leading	Developing
AK	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Leading	Foundational
AZ	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Leading	Advanced
AR	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Developing
CA	Advanced	Leading	Leading	Leading	Advanced
CO	Foundational	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
CT	Foundational	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Developing
DE	Foundational	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Leading
DC	Not applicable	Advanced	Not applicable	Leading	Not applicable
FL	Advanced	Leading	Leading	Leading	Advanced
GA	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
HI	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
ID	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Developing
IL	Developing	Leading	Leading	Leading	Advanced
IN	Developing	Advanced	Leading	Leading	Advanced
IA	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
KS	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Developing
KY	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
LA	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Foundational
ME	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
MD	Developing	Leading	Leading	Leading	Advanced
MA	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Advanced
MI	Developing	Leading	Leading	Leading	Developing
MN	Developing	Advanced	Leading	Advanced	Advanced
MS	Foundational	Leading	Foundational	Leading	Developing
MO	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Developing
MT	Developing	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Foundational
NE	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Developing
NV	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Foundational
NH	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Advanced
NJ	Foundational	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Advanced
NM	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Foundational
NY	Advanced	Leading	Leading	Leading	Developing
NC	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Advanced
ND	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Leading	Developing
OH	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Developing
OK	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Advanced	Developing
OR	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
PA	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Developing
RI	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Advanced
SC	Foundational	Leading	Developing	Leading	Advanced
SD	Foundational	Developing	Developing	Advanced	Developing
TN	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
TX	Foundational	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
UT	Foundational	Advanced	Developing	Leading	Developing
VT	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced
VA	Foundational	Leading	Developing	Leading	Advanced
WA	Developing	Leading	Leading	Leading	Advanced
WV	Developing	Leading	Advanced	Leading	Developing
WI	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Developing
WY	Developing	Advanced	Advanced	Leading	Developing

Figure 17: Changes in elements of Affordability for states that increased their bachelor's degree Affordability category

↑ Improved
↓ Declined
= Stayed the same

State	Category	Average student	Low-income student	On-time completion
CA	Leading	=	=	↑
DE	Advanced	=	↑	=
GA	Developing	↑	↑	↑
IL	Advanced	↑	↑	↑
MA	Advanced	↑	=	=
MI	Advanced	↑	↑	=
MN	Advanced	↑	=	↑
NH	Developing	=	↑	=
NC	Advanced	↑	=	=
OR	Developing	↑	↑	=
RI	Advanced	↑	=	↑
TX	Developing	=	↑	=
VT	Advanced	↑	=	=

In breaking apart the elements of Affordability, some additional patterns emerge. For the average student, 13 states improved their rating on the number of hours of work needed to cover costs. In seven of these states, net price fell, while in the other six, net price increased, but these increases were more than offset by increased wages, meaning that in real terms education became less expensive. Hours of work needed improved mainly in states that had been Foundational in 2025; the number of states in which the average student would need to work more than 30 hours per week to cover the cost of their education fell substantially.

For low-income students, improvement also was widespread. Ten states made meaningful enough progress to improve their rating on the number of hours of work needed for low-income students to cover their costs. (Eight of these 10 states reduced their net price for low-income students, while the other two saw relative affordability gains due to wage increases.) In nine states, low-income students could pay for their educational expenses with fewer than 10 hours of work per week during the school year, a level of affordability that is not matched in any state for the average student. These states include California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, and Washington state.

In on-time completion, eight states moved up to a higher category: California, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Utah.[5] The largest on-time graduation rate gains were in Utah (from 28 percent to 37 percent), Hawaii (from 34 percent to 41 percent), and Rhode Island (from 47 percent to 52 percent). Delaware still has the highest on-time completion rate at 65 percent, followed by Florida and Vermont at 60 percent, New Hampshire at 59 percent, and Virginia at 57 percent. While states that have higher on-time completion rates tend to be slightly more selective (as measured by lower admissions rates at bachelor's degree institutions), the states that made gains in on-time completion did not show a pattern of restricting admission.

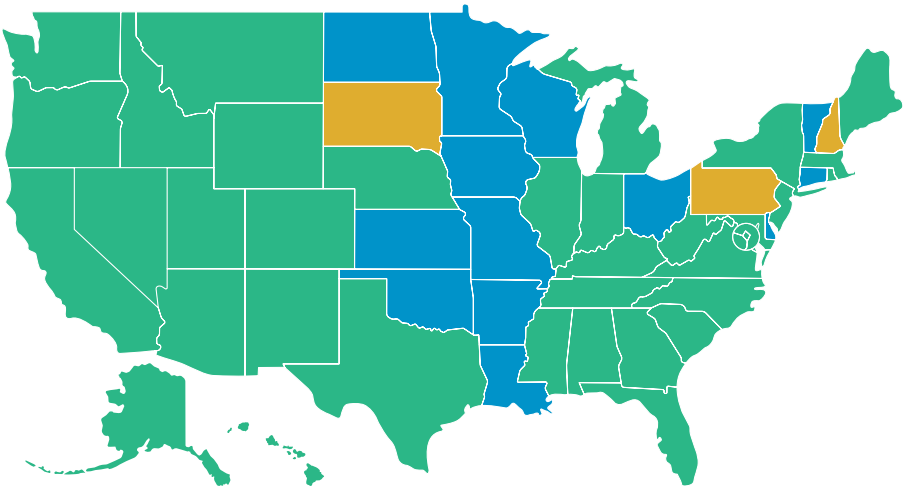
In the three states with a lower overall category in 2026 compared to 2025 – Alaska, Utah, and Wyoming – the change was due to increased net price for low-income students.

Affordability of public associate degree institutions

Education at public associate degree institutions continues to be very affordable in most states. From an already strong base, three states improved in their categorization: New Hampshire, North Dakota, and Vermont. There are a total of 35 states in the Leading category for associate degree institutions, 13 states Advanced, 3 states Developing, and no states Foundational.

Figure 18: Affordability of public associate degree institutions, by state

Note: There are 51 total states/territories with the inclusion of the District of Columbia.



FOUNDATIONAL	DEVELOPING	ADVANCED	LEADING
0 states	3 states	13 states	35 states

For the average student, there are 25 states in which a student could work fewer than 10 hours per week and cover their educational expenses, another 22 states in which 10-20 hours per week would suffice, and four states in which 20-30 hours of work per week would be necessary. In all, there were gains substantial enough to result in higher ratings for eight states on the number of hours of work needed for the average student to cover their costs, while four states declined in this category. Half of the states that made improvements lowered their net price, while the other half saw slightly increased net prices that were outpaced by wage growth. On the other hand, the states in which students were worse off in 2026, had net price increases that were substantially higher.

Figure 19: Changes in elements of Affordability for states that increased their associate degree Affordability category

↑ Improved
↓ Declined
= Stayed the same

State	Category	Average Student	Low-Income Student
NH	Developing	↑	↑
ND	Advanced	=	↑
VT	Advanced	↑	=

For the first time, there are no states in the Foundational or Developing categories for the number of hours of work needed for low-income students. Individuals from these households could work fewer than 10 hours per week and cover expenses in 36 states, whereas in another 15 states 10-20 hours of work per week would be needed. Two states improved enough to boost their rating on this element compared to 2025.

Pathways to Progress

Taken together, the results here paint a generally positive trend for students from 2025 to 2026. Notably, the most current data available for these comparisons have a two-year time lag and reflect conditions in 2024. With the spend-down of pandemic assistance funds and the changes in the balance of federal and state Medicare funding, it will be important to monitor current conditions. To that end, the most recent State Higher Education Finance report for 2024-25 showed the first reductions in state appropriations per student in more than a decade.[6] If this reduction in appropriations turns into a persistent downward trend, the gains depicted in this year's results may reverse in the coming years.

As states prioritize affordable opportunities to complete degrees and certificates, we note significant efforts on reducing both costs and time to completion.

Reducing costs for students.

Holding tuition flat while wages increase is the path taken by most states that improved on the number of hours of work needed to pay for education. Some states made gains by strategically targeting their financial aid through innovative approaches to the design of need-based aid programs. For high-demand occupations, there is a trend among some states, employers, and philanthropic organizations to target aid to reduce costs for students in priority fields of study.

In addition, half of states now are offering community college bachelor's (CCBs) degrees. Among other differences, community college tuition can be more affordable for bachelor's degree seeking students.

Reducing time to completion.

Many states intentionally are designing dual enrollment and credit for prior learning solutions that ensure these experiences count toward degree requirements. Similarly, there are continued efforts with intentional approaches to creating clear degree pathways, and the accompanying student advising, in order to improve on-time completion.

Additionally, institutions in more than half of states now are offering accelerated bachelor's degrees that allow students to finish their degree in as little as three years by creating 90-credit degree options.

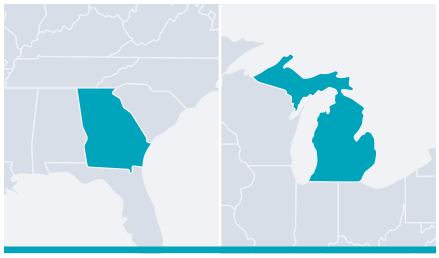
States to Watch



Arizona is expanding affordable pathways to bachelor's degrees through community colleges. Following 2021 legislation authorizing workforce-aligned community college baccalaureate programs in high-population counties, Maricopa Community Colleges now offers 11 bachelor's degrees in high-demand fields, with more than 10,000 students currently enrolled and 93 percent of students across the system graduating debt-free.



Delaware has combined higher wages with expanded state financial aid to increase the resources students have available to meet college costs. The state raised its minimum wage from $9.25 in 2021 to $15 in 2025 while expanding the SEED Scholarship to include adult learners and a broader range of programs, including certificates and stackable credentials that lead directly to a bachelor's degree at the University of Delaware.



Georgia and **Michigan** are expanding need-based financial aid to help more students afford college. The Michigan Achievement Scholarship provides eligible students pursuing bachelor's degrees with up to $5,500 annually, while its Community College Guarantee covers in-district tuition and mandatory fees for recent high school graduates. Georgia launched the DREAMS Scholarship in 2026, providing Pell-eligible students with unmet financial need up to $3,000 annually. The state invested $25 million to fund scholarships beginning in fall 2026 and $300 million in a permanent endowment to sustain the program over the long term.



Maine has emerged as a national leader in piloting reduced-credit bachelor's degree programs aimed at lowering time to completion and cost barriers for students. Enrollment in these accelerated pathways is restricted to "adult degree completers" — students with prior college credit who have been away from higher education for at least two years — and all five pilot programs were built for online delivery. The University of Maine System worked closely with its regional accreditor to establish these accelerated pathways, ensuring a clearer process for other institutions seeking 90-credit accreditation in the future.


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Work-Based Learning

Results Overview

- 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.

Immersive paid work-based learning experiences are instrumental in improving post-graduation career outcomes. The benefits include greater likelihood of securing a college-level job, earning more over time, and being more satisfied with a career path, even when accounting for differences in field of study, academic performance, and student demographics. States, systems, and institutions increasingly are focused on ensuring students are prepared for these opportunities and supported in securing them.

Measurement

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Work-Based Learning appendix.

The results reported here are based on more than 110,000 responses from a nationally representative survey of currently enrolled postsecondary students at public colleges and universities. State results also are representative of their respective publicly enrolled student populations. Bachelor's degree results are based on responses from graduating seniors, while associate degree results are based on the currently enrolled population, excluding dual-enrollment students. The 2026 results are based on a rolling average of survey responses collected in 2025 and 2026. Combining two years of data produces more precise and stable state estimates, particularly for states with smaller populations, similar to the U.S. Census American Community Survey's use of multi-year estimates.

These self-reported survey data capture the extent to which students reported participating in any of the following types of paid work-based learning:

1. Paid internship
2. Paid co-op
3. Paid practicum (such as student teaching or nursing clinical)
4. Paid undergraduate research experience outside of a course
5. Paid apprenticeship

While students participate in other experiences that blend learning and careers, these five experiences share the qualities of being:

- Immersive (taking place in a real workplace setting),
- Compensated (enabling access for more students and signaling work that is of value to employers), and
- Intensive (generally lasting at least one academic term and sometimes multiple).

These models and these qualities have been most closely associated with positive career outcomes for students.

For bachelor's degree institutions, each state's progress is categorized according to the proportion of students who participated in at least one of these experiences, using the thresholds below:

FOUNDATIONAL	DEVELOPING	ADVANCED	LEADING
<25%	25% to <50%	50% to <75%	75% to 100%

In cases in which the thresholds between categories were within the statistical margin of error for the student survey, the state is classified in a joint category, such as Developing/Advanced. For associate degree institutions, the Index reports participation levels by state but currently does not assign states to the four progress categories.

Findings

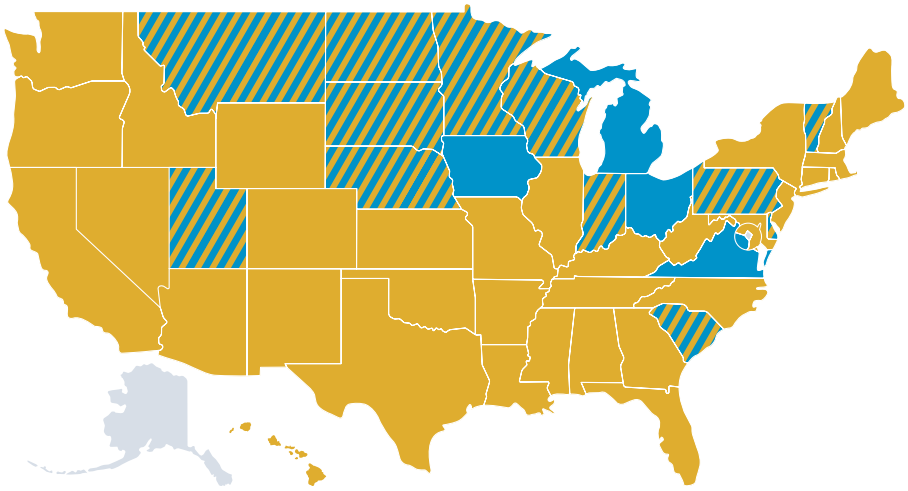
Work-based learning at public bachelor's degree institutions

Forty-three percent of graduating seniors at public bachelor's degree institutions nationwide reported participating in one of the five types of paid work-based learning, consistent with the national average of 43 percent in 2025.

- There are now four states in the Advanced category – Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, and Virginia – compared to two states last year. In these states, a majority of graduating seniors from their public institutions participated in paid work-based learning.
- Twelve states are on the threshold between Developing and Advanced: Delaware, Indiana, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, and Wisconsin.
- Thirty-three states are Developing. Alaska and the District of Columbia did not have sufficient sample sizes to report at this time.

Figure 20: Work-Based Learning at public bachelor's degree institutions, by state

Insufficient data to report at this time



FOUNDATIONAL	DEVELOPING	DEV./ADV.	ADVANCED	LEADING
0 states	33 states	12 states	4 states	0 states

Participation in paid internships, at 35 percent, was by far the most common work-based learning experience – almost six times more prevalent than the next closest experience of paid undergraduate research, at 6 percent.

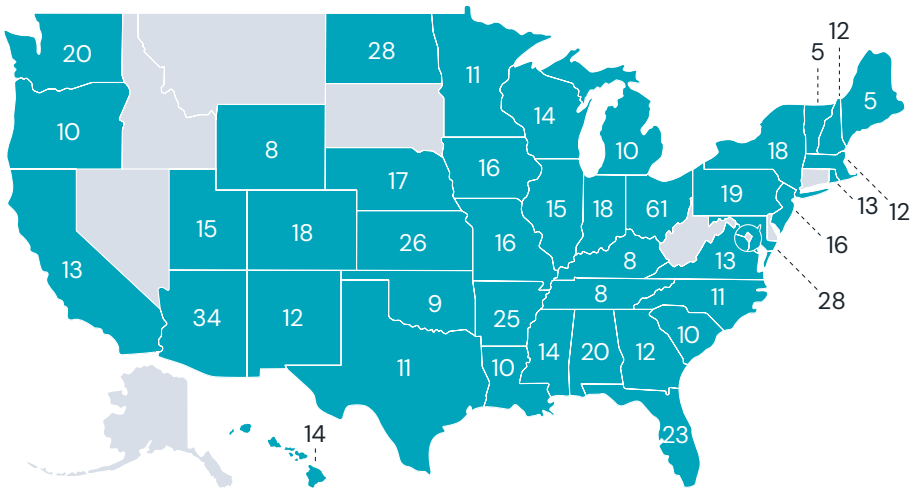
Examination of the immersive experiences that were unpaid highlights opportunities for state and institutional policies and practices that can recognize their value and remove barriers through providing pay. In addition to the 43 percent of seniors who had a paid work-based learning experience, another 28 percent had an unpaid experience through one of the five immersive models, for a total of 71 percent participation.

Figure 21: Participation and pay across five types of work-based learning, bachelor's degree institutions

	Participated	Participated and were paid
Internship	50%	35%
Apprenticeship[8]	4%	3%
Co-op	4%	1%
Practicum	19%	4%
Undergraduate research experience	23%	6%
Any of these experiences	71%	43%

Figure 22: Work-Based Learning at public associate degree institutions, by state (percent participating in paid experiences)

Insufficient data to report at this time



Work-based learning at public associate degree institutions

For associate degree institutions, results are presented as participation rates rather than progress categories. Participation in paid work-based learning models among students attending associate degree-granting institutions is slightly lower compared to 2025 (14 percent compared to 17 percent in 2025).

- In four states – Arizona, Kansas, North Dakota, and Arkansas – a quarter or more of community college students report participating in paid work-based learning opportunities.
- Eight states and the District of Columbia did not have a sufficient sample at this time to report on students attending associate degree-granting institutions.

Among the five types of immersive work-based learning, irrespective of whether they were paid, students at associate degree institutions were most likely to report having had an internship (15 percent), closely followed by practicum (12 percent). Percentages for undergraduate research, apprenticeship, and co-op experiences remain in the single digits. Among students who did participate, the most frequently compensated were apprenticeships, internships, and co-ops.

For associate degree institutions, the Index currently reports participation levels so states can compare student experiences while the criteria for categorizing state progress continues to be refined.

Students at associate degree institutions have a range of aspirations and needs that may differ from those of students at bachelor's degree institutions. Many are pursuing pathways other than a degree: certificates account for 44 percent of community college awards, and about one-third of community college students transfer to a bachelor's program, most without first earning a degree.[7] Community college students also are more likely to balance school and substantial work commitments. One-third of survey respondents at associate degree institutions reported working at least 30 hours per week while in school, compared with 14 percent of respondents at bachelor's degree institutions.

These varied pathways and circumstances highlight the need for work-based learning models that reflect the many ways community college students pursue education and career goals, and there is still much to learn about which approaches work best. Evidence linking work-based learning to post-completion outcomes for students at associate degree institutions remains limited outside of registered apprenticeships, making further research important for identifying which models are most effective.

Figure 23: Participation and pay across five types of work-based learning, associate degree institutions

	Participated	Participated and were paid
Internship	15%	10%
Apprenticeship	4%	3%
Co-op	3%	1%
Practicum	12%	2%
Undergraduate research experience	5%	1%
Any of these experiences	30%	14%

Other experiences that connect work and learning

The five paid immersive work-based learning models included in the Index do not capture all of the ways students connect work and learning. Other experiences — including micro-internships, project-based learning, service learning, externships, and part- or full-time employment — also provide opportunities to develop and apply career-relevant skills. At the same time, less is known about how the benefits of these experiences compare with work-based learning models such as paid internships and apprenticeships, where the evidence is more established. Continued innovation in this space reflects the many ways states and institutions are expanding opportunities for students to connect education and employment.

Pathways to Progress

As students report pursuing and participating in these experiences, states increasingly are prioritizing work-based learning as an essential strategy to improve career outcomes and strengthen the connection between education and employment, and support economic development across the state. They are enacting a range of policies and practices to expand access, reduce financial barriers, strengthen institutional capacity, and build more durable partnerships with employers.

Setting statewide goals and expectations.

Many states have established public commitments to make work-based learning accessible to every student. The mechanism for these commitments ranges from inclusion in a master plan to legislation to degree requirements that incorporate work-based learning in every program. Some targets are paired with dedicated funding or competitive grants to help institutions and employers expand their capacity.

Making progress visible and measurable.

States and systems are working toward establishing common definitions of work-based learning and ways to collect participation data at the campus and program level. For some states, this includes publicly available interactive dashboards.

Building statewide infrastructure and employer partnerships.

A growing number of states have established coordinating bodies that bring together employers, higher education, workforce agencies, and other partners to make it easier for employers to engage and to reduce fragmentation.

Similarly, a few states are investing in statewide or regional employer intermediary organizations that provide services such as solutions design, partnership brokering, and administrative support to businesses and higher education institutions. Sustained, diversified funding is key to maintaining the efficacy of these organizations over time.

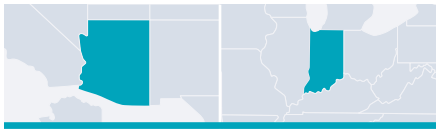
Creating models to pay students for participation in practicum settings that historically have been unpaid.

A growing number of states have invested in stipends or other direct support for student teachers, recognizing that the required full-time teaching experience often prevents aspiring educators from earning income elsewhere. Several states have launched registered nurse apprenticeship programs that allow students to earn wages while completing clinical training.

Utilizing existing student jobs, both on and off campus, as an opportunity to develop professional skills.

Some institutions are seeking to maximize the career value of student employment by intentionally incorporating supervisor training and guided student reflection. To date, these programs have mainly focused on on-campus work, but there is potential to apply these same principles to help students gain more value from their off-campus work experiences as well.

States to Watch



In **Arizona** and **Indiana,** community colleges are prioritizing the employer experience to expand work-based learning opportunities through an established employer consultant team at Indiana's Ivy Tech and a career readiness and job-matching platform used widely across the state in Arizona.



Massachusetts, Ohio, and **Virginia** are pairing statewide goals to expand paid internships and co-ops with investments that help institutions and employers build capacity, including Massachusetts' Cooperative Education Initiative and Virginia's investments in paid internships.



North Carolina, Kentucky, Maryland, and **Washington** are building coordinating bodies and intermediary capacity that bring employers, education, and workforce partners together and make it easier to develop and scale work-based learning opportunities, including North Carolina's Careers Electric, Kentucky's Statewide Workforce and Talent Team, Maryland's Industry Apprenticeship Accelerator, and Washington in the Making 2040.



New York, Louisiana, and **Colorado** are developing the definitions, data infrastructure, and reporting tools needed to better understand participation in work-based learning and make progress visible, including the State University of New York's High-Impact Practice Metrics Dashboard, Louisiana's Task Force on Career Alignment, and Colorado's statewide framework.



Pennsylvania and **Michigan** provide stipends to help aspiring teachers complete required student teaching through programs such as Pennsylvania's Student Teacher Support Program and the MI Future Educator Stipend, while **Alabama** and **Oregon** have created pathways for nursing students to earn wages while completing clinical training through approaches such as Alabama's Student Nurse Apprentice and Oregon's nurse internship model.


Website
Development
Apr 2026

Employer Alignment

Results Overview

- 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 in the Advanced category.
- 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 levels remain 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.

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

More information on the results for each state can be found in the Employer Alignment appendix.

The Employer Alignment metric for each state is an average score combining:

1. The percentage of recent bachelor's degree graduates (with no further advanced degrees) employed in jobs that typically require a college degree, and
2. The supply/demand ratio for high-demand, high-wage entry-level jobs (opportunity jobs) in a set of nine occupational areas.

College-level employment is measured by using the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (five-year), accessed via IPUMS. The sample is limited to those actively employed and early-career (ages 25-34). Occupations are classified as typically requiring a college degree if the Bureau of Labor Statistics educational assignments so designates them.

The subset of occupations included in the supply/demand analysis (see Figure 24) were identified for delivering strong initial earnings and continued economic advancement.

Figure 24: Opportunity occupations

Information Technology and Business	Data analytics
	Finance and accounting professionals
	Finance and accounting support
	Information and cybersecurity
	Software development and engineering
Healthcare	Healthcare technicians and technologists
	Nursing
Manufacturing and Engineering	Engineering
	Manufacturing/trades technicians and technologists

Together, the opportunity jobs across these nine areas represent approximately 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 associate or bachelor's degree programs (public and private) that are connected with the set of selected opportunity jobs. Demand is calculated from 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.

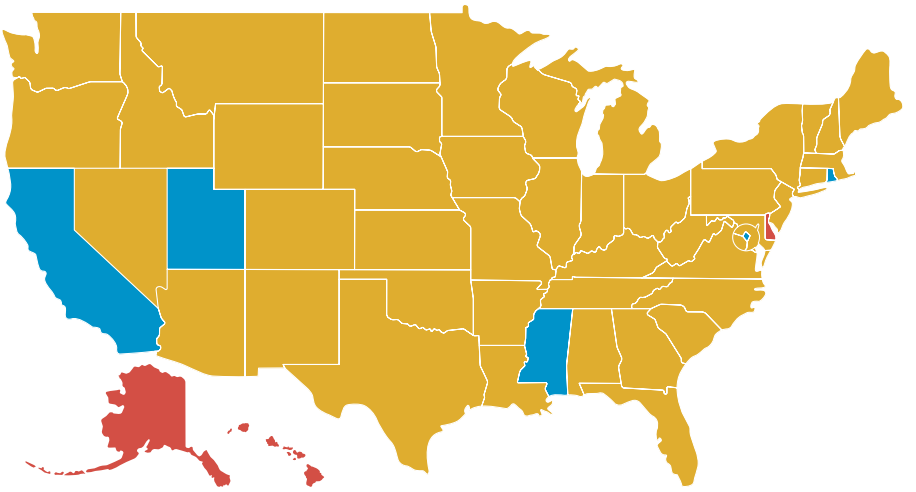
Each state's talent supply/demand ratio is averaged with the college-level employment percentages of recent bachelor's degree graduates to produce the Employer Alignment indicator for the state's education system and its labor market. State progress is categorized accordingly:

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

Findings

Overall, there was a net improvement of two states into the Advanced category and 11 states into the Developing category (leaving only three states at Foundational). No states are Leading in Employer Alignment. Four states, California, Mississippi, Rhode Island, and Utah, plus the District of Columbia, are Advanced, 43 are Developing, and three are Foundational.

Figure 25: Employer Alignment, by state



FOUNDATIONAL	DEVELOPING	ADVANCED	LEADING
3 states	43 states	5 states	0 states

The improvement is driven not by changes in college-level employment or in the supply of graduates that are prepared to fill high-demand fields, both of which stayed stable from last year. Instead, states improved their supply/demand ratios because employer demand has slowed.

Employer demand fell in software development and engineering, cybersecurity, data analytics, finance professionals, and engineers. Some of this year's strongest composite scores (Mississippi and Rhode Island) achieved their results at least partially through weak demand. The demand slowdown has not yet reached the underemployment indicator, which is a five-year average based on data from 2020 to 2024 that still includes the high-employment levels from the 2021-22 labor market. There are additional indications that the number of recent graduates securing college-level employment has been in a steady decline over the past five years.[9]

College-level employment

College-level employment remained stable and consistent from last year. States with the highest rates of college-level employment are:

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

Figure 26: Percentage of early-career bachelor's degree completers (ages 25-34) with college-level jobs, by state



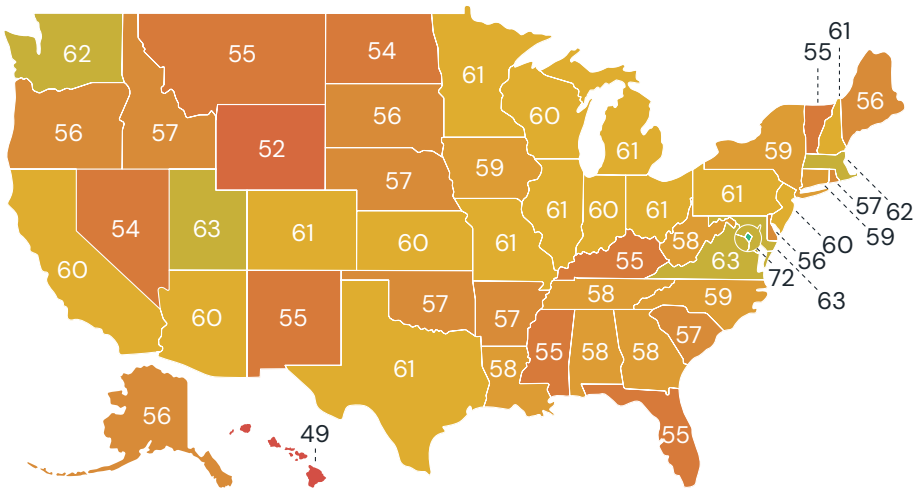


Figure 27: College-level employment of early-career bachelor's degree graduates

	College-Level Employment
National	60%
Female	60%
Male	59%
Asian, non-Hispanic	69%
Other/Multiracial, non-Hispanic	62%
White, non-Hispanic	61%
Hispanic	54%
Black, non-Hispanic	52%
Engineering	78%
Computer and Information Sciences	75%
Medical and Health Sciences	72%
Education	71%
Physical Sciences	59%
Business	58%
Communications	57%
Social Sciences	57%
Biology and Life Sciences	55%
English	54%
Fine Arts	52%
Psychology	51%
Physical Fitness, Parks, Recreation, and Leisure	44%
Criminal Justice and Fire Protection	33%

Nationally, college-level employment is 60 percent, meaning just 6 in 10 early-career bachelor's degree graduates are working in jobs that typically require a college degree. Male and female graduates had similar rates of college-level employment. There are meaningful differences by race and ethnicity, with Asian recent graduates experiencing the highest rates of college-level employment at 69 percent, while Hispanic (54 percent) and Black graduates (52 percent) have the lowest rates (see Figure 27). The differences by field of study are even larger, with a broad range in college-level employment across the most popular majors (see Figure 27).

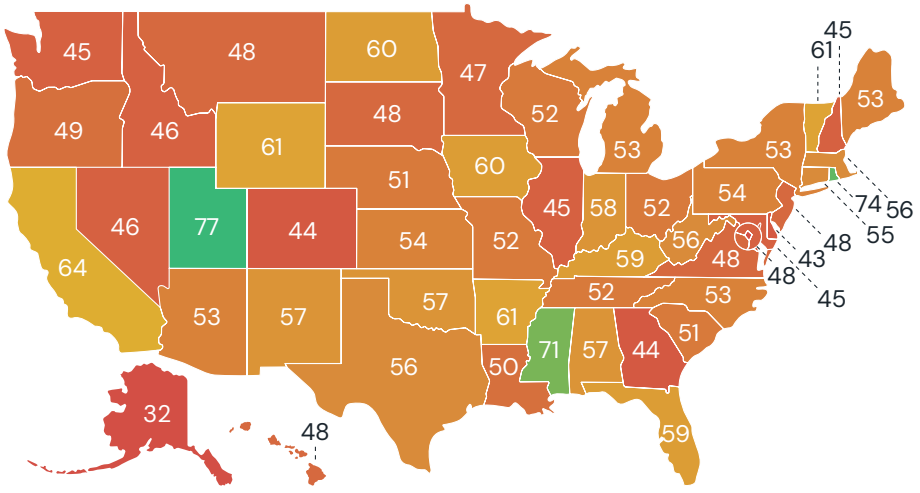


Supply-demand ratio

The top states for potentially meeting their talent demand for opportunity jobs through the graduates of the colleges and universities in their states are Utah, Rhode Island, and Mississippi — all exceeding 70 percent. Overall, broad patterns of unfilled demand remain consistent with last year, with shortages in finance and accounting (professionals and support), healthcare technicians, and nursing in every state. Conversely, information technology occupational areas including software engineering, data analytics, and cybersecurity have a supply of graduates that meets demand in these fields in nearly every state.

Figure 28: Supply/demand ratio for opportunity jobs, by state





Pathways to Progress

Overall, state results for Employer Alignment show progress, primarily through incremental improvements in eleven states moving from Foundational to Developing, while only four states and the District of Columbia have reached the Advanced category and none are Leading. At the same time, there is some cause for caution around interpreting these gains.

In a climate of uncertainty and some employer caution around new hires, states have established priorities to better prepare their graduates for career opportunities in their state.

Ensuring statewide and regional talent strategies are responsive, coordinated, and data-informed.

A few states are moving beyond siloed strategic plans for K-12, higher education, economic development, and workforce development to ensure each sector contributes to a unified vision for accelerating individual opportunity and economic competitiveness.

A few states are working to create a more unified analytical function integrating data from K-12, higher education, and workforce and economic development into more sophisticated actionable intelligence. These emergent State Offices of Education Economics help leaders identify talent pipeline gaps, understand how higher education supports industry talent development, and inform policy, program, and investment decisions across the higher education, workforce and economic development landscape.

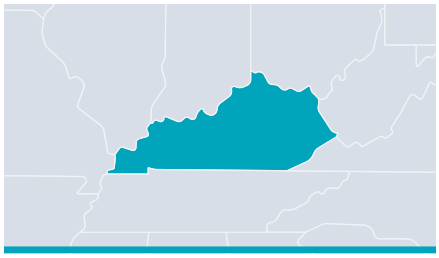
Expanding capacity for programs that prepare graduates for fields with persistent talent shortages.

Some states and employers are working together to prepare the talent they need, including opening or expanding apprenticeship pathways for nursing and healthcare technicians, and pairing capital investments with completion targets in specific fields, such as information technology.

Several states are expanding community college pathways and stackable credentials, sometimes beginning at the high school career and technical education level and other times upskilling existing healthcare workers.

A few states are revising their funding formulas to weight dollars toward higher-cost fields or tie a share of appropriations to completions in high-priority fields.

States to Watch



Kentucky is using data, employer engagement, and coordinated talent planning to strengthen alignment between education and workforce needs. KYStats provides labor market and education-to-employment insights, while the Kentucky Chamber's Workforce Center and Talent Pipeline Management model gives employers a leading role in defining talent needs and working with educators to shape relevant training.



Louisiana is advancing an integrated, whole-of-government approach to align education, workforce development, and economic growth around high-wage employer needs. Through the Governor's Economic Strike Force, the state is partnering with higher education institutions and the Louisiana Workforce Commission to scale employer-backed talent development and placement solutions that target priority sectors.



Indiana is strengthening the connection between education, workforce, and economic development through new investments in shared analytics and statewide talent planning. Established through Senate Enrolled Act 254, the Indiana Workforce Innovation Lab (I-WIL) will examine how effectively education and workforce investments are producing the talent employers need, while a joint state talent plan will bring agencies together around shared workforce priorities beginning in 2027.



Virginia is aligning education, workforce, and economic development around employer talent needs, a strategic priority championed by the Virginia Chamber of Commerce's Blueprint Virginia 2035. Guided by this business-led emphasis on talent development, the Virginia Office of Education Economics uses education and labor market data to identify high-demand fields and inform state investments. Concurrently, the Tech Talent Investment Program ties university funding to growth in computer science and related degrees, and the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program complements these efforts by providing customized recruitment and training for companies creating jobs in the state.

Summary

The findings in this year's State Opportunity Index highlight the progress made by states and institutions and point to the next frontiers for ensuring postsecondary education delivers strong value for every student. This progress takes many shapes and forms as states develop solutions tailored to their context and opportunities.

When it comes to **Clear Outcomes,** most states are relatively strong in connecting their postsecondary education data to employment outcomes and making this information publicly accessible. There is still the most progress to be made in collecting data on occupation, work location, and hourly earnings, and in providing learners with access to a trusted record of their education and employment experiences.

Quality Coaching saw notable gains in 2026, with eight states improving at the bachelor's degree level compared to 2025 and no states in the Foundational category for either bachelor's or associate degree institutions. There was a particular increase in students receiving timely labor market information on careers that connect to their strengths and interests, and job opportunities connected to their field of study, though information on salaries or outcomes of alumni from their institution remains scarcer.

Many states also made gains in **Affordability,** with no Foundational states at the associate degree level and progress in 13 states at the bachelor's degree level. This progress represents a decrease in the number of hours a student needs to work to cover costs (achieved either by decreasing student costs or holding costs steady, while increased student earnings improve affordability) and improvements in the percentage of students graduating on time.

Work-Based Learning participation stayed fairly consistent, with four states at the Advanced level for bachelor's degree institutions, compared to two in 2025. National participation held steady, with a small drop in paid internships that was offset by an increased percentage of students receiving pay for undergraduate research and practica.



In **Employer Alignment,** 13 states improved, though most states (43) are still in the Developing stage, with five Advanced states and three Foundational. College-level employment and the supply of graduates in high-wage, high-demand fields stayed consistent, while employer demand fell slightly. Among the high-wage, high-demand fields, graduates in information technology-related fields encountered the most balanced labor market, though college-level employment for computer science graduates still is among the strongest for any field, together with engineering, health, and education.

Strengthening the connection between education and opportunity requires sustained commitment. Across the country, state and institutional leaders are investing the time, energy, and resources needed to build stronger pathways to mobility and security for learners and preparing a future talent pool that can help local economies thrive.

2026 Leading, Advanced, or Improved States

ELEMENT	ADVANCED	LEADING
Clear Outcomes	AL AZ CA FL HI IL IA IN KS LA MA MS MO MT NE ND OK OR PA SC UT WY	AR CO CT GA KY MD MI MN NJ NC OH RI TN TX VA WA WV
Quality Coaching (Bachelor's)	AL DE IN KS SC	–
Quality Coaching (Associate)	AZ HI IN KS KY LA ME MS MO NE NM NC ND OK RI TN WY	–
Affordability (Bachelor's)	AZ DE IL IN MD MA MI MN NY NC RI VT WA	CA FL
Affordability (Associate)	AR CT DE IA KS LA MN MO ND OH OK VT WI	AL AK AZ CA CO DC FL GA HI ID IL IN KY ME MD MA MI MS MT NE NV NJ NM NY NC OR RI SC TN TX UT VA WA WV WY
Work-Based Learning (Bachelor's)	IA MI OH VA	–
Employer Alignment	CA DC MS RI UT	–

ELEMENT	IMPROVED
Clear Outcomes	AZ DEV > ADV; MA DEV > ADV; MI ADV > LEA; TX ADV > LEA; VT FND > DEV
Quality Coaching (Bachelor's)	AL DEV > ADV; CA FND > DEV; DE DEV > ADV; IN DEV > ADV; KS DEV > ADV; MA FND > DEV; SC DEV > ADV; WA FND > DEV
Quality Coaching (Associate)	LA DEV > ADV; TN DEV > ADV
Affordability (Bachelor's)	CA ADV > LEA; DE DEV > ADV; GA FND > DEV; IL DEV > ADV; MA DEV > ADV; MI DEV > ADV; MN DEV > ADV; NH FND > DEV; NC DEV > ADV; OR FND > DEV; RI DEV > ADV; TX FND > DEV; VT DEV > ADV
Affordability (Associate)	NH FND > DEV; ND DEV > ADV; VT DEV > ADV
Work-Based Learning (Bachelor's)	MI DEV/ADV > ADV; OH DEV/ADV > ADV; VA DEV/ADV > ADV
Employer Alignment	DC DEV > ADV; GA FND > DEV; ID FND > DEV; LA FND > DEV; ME FND > DEV; MS DEV > ADV; MT FND > DEV; NV FND > DEV; NM FND > DEV; OR FND > DEV; SD FND > DEV; TN FND > DEV; WY FND > DEV

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Endnotes

1. Since the publication of the 2025 State Opportunity Index, the criteria for some elements have been refined to improve the rigor and policy relevance of the Clear Outcomes framework. Please see the appendix for full details.
2. Median wage is calculated from the American Community Survey 2024 five-year estimates and accessed via IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. Net price is accessed through the College Scorecard 2024-25 data, which reflects the 2023-24 academic year.
3. 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.
4. Note that the University of the District of Columbia, the only public institution in Washington, D.C., was reclassified from predominantly bachelor's degree to predominantly associate or certificate. Therefore, Washington, D.C., is not rated for bachelor's degree institutions this year.
5. This reflects the latest data available from the College Scorecard, reported in IPEDS 2024-2025, which is the cohort of students that entered college in Fall 2018.
6. State Higher Education Finance: FY 2025. (Boulder, CO, and Washington, DC: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2026). (shef.sheeo.org)
7. Davis Jenkins, John Fink, Tatiana Velasco, and Daniel March, "Which Community College Awards Are Likely to Prepare Students for Post-Completion Success?" (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2023), https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/dashboard/community-college-awards-for-post-completion-success.html; "Tracking Transfer: Entering Community College Cohort Dashboard – 2018," (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018), https://nscresearchcenter.org/tracking-transfer-entering-cc-cohort-dashboard-2018/.
8. On the 2025 SOI survey, all apprenticeships were assumed to be paid. In 2026, students who participated in each type of work-based learning experience also were asked if they were paid. By default, all registered apprenticeships are required to be paid, but students may be reflecting on other experiences that are not registered or pre-apprenticeship programs.
9. Estimates of underemployment using Lightcast social profiles data for more recent years show steadily rising underemployment for each graduating class since 2022. This trend is not concentrated in one field of study.



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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