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Building Career Pathways Systems for Education, Training, and Employment

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This brief discusses the implementation of career pathways under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and considerations for state adult education staff in developing career pathways systems to support individuals in their pursuit of education and employment. Highlighted are activities in supporting career pathways as part of WIOA, Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. Considerations are presented for assessing the implementation of career pathways, determining professional development to support career pathways, and the collection and use of data related to career pathways services.

Introduction

Crucial to the nation's economic growth and individuals' social and personal well-being is the availability of education and training that enables adults to learn new skills, obtain higher paying jobs, and build careers. Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey of Adult Skills underscore the need for adults' skill development. Approximately 36 million U.S. adults have low skills in literacy (17 percent) or in numeracy (nearly 33 percent).¹ While more than half (63 percent) of low-skilled adults are employed, there are 14.5 million workers with low basic skills making less than \$30,000 a year.² Analyses of data from the PIAAC's U.S. National Supplement illustrate the critical need for education and training opportunities for unemployed adults. Approximately 75 percent of unemployed U.S. adults ages 16-65 have a high school credential or less. About a third of these individuals perform at the lowest level of literacy measured in the PIAAC, and about half perform

¹ "Low-literacy and "low" numeracy skills are defined as below Level 2 as measured by the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

² OECD (2013), *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?: What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing. Retrieved 9/1/16 from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204904-en>

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at the lowest level of numeracy.³ These data suggest that a considerable number of adults, regardless of employment status, would benefit from education and training that enables them to move toward economic and career success.

The primary federal legislation supporting education, training services, and workforce development for adults—the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014—is a catalyst for delivering the types of education, training, and employment services that facilitate adults’ economic and career success. WIOA emphasizes the building and alignment of workforce investment, education, and economic development systems that deliver comprehensive employment, education, and supportive services. These services are expected to enable individuals, particularly those with barriers to employment, to obtain the skills and credentials needed to secure jobs with family-sustaining wages, as well as to provide employers with the skilled workforce needed to succeed in a global economy.

A key approach highlighted in WIOA is career pathways, a promising strategy for organizing comprehensive education, employment, and supportive services that enable adults to develop careers aligned with high-demand and high-growth occupations. Discussed in this brief is the implementation of career pathways under WIOA, and considerations for state adult education staff in developing career pathways systems to support individuals in their pursuit of education and employment. Examples are provided from states’ activities in preparing to implement WIOA, Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act.⁴ These examples illustrate approaches that state staff can take to facilitate adults’ development of skills and attainment of credentials as key steps to earning family-sustaining wages and developing careers.⁵

Context for Career Pathways in WIOA

WIOA aims to strengthen the U.S. workforce development system by aligning employment, training, and education programs and improving their quality through innovative approaches that address the needs of adults and youth. Career pathways, consistently referenced in WIOA Titles I and II, is an approach that includes innovative policies and practices to facilitate individuals’ education and employment success. As defined in WIOA, Section 3(7), career pathways is “a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that:

- Align with skill needs of state/local economy;
- Prepare individuals for success through a range of secondary/postsecondary education options, including apprenticeships;
- Include counseling;

³ Rampey, B.D., Finnegan, R., Goodman, M., Mohadjer, L., Krenzke, T., Hogan, J., and Provasnik, S., (2016). *Skills of U.S. Unemployed, Young, and Older workers in Sharper Focus: Results from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2012/2014: First Look (NCES 2016-039rev)*. U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved 8/30/16 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

⁴ WIOA is comprised of the following Core Programs: Title I—Adult and Dislocated Workers Employment and Training Activities; Title I—Youth Workforce Investment Activities; Title II—Adult Education and Family Literacy Act; Title III—Wagner Peyser; and Title IV—Vocational Rehabilitation.

⁵ The examples are from the *Moving Pathways Forward: Supporting Career Pathways Integration* project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, in which 19 states received technical assistance in career pathways state and local systems building.

- Can include concurrent instruction and workforce preparation and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;
- Are organized to accelerate educational and career advancement;
- Enable an individual to attain a secondary credential and at least one recognized postsecondary credential; and
- Help an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.”

Assumptions guiding career pathways are that education and training services (1) are well-aligned to the regional or state economy; (2) include a range of instructional approaches that are accelerated and contextualized to occupations; and (3) provide counseling to enable individuals to develop skills, attain secondary and postsecondary credentials, and advance within occupations. Fundamental to the design of career pathways are strong partnerships between public and private entities to facilitate the delivery of diverse, high-quality services. WIOA, with its emphasis on partnership development, provides legislative support for states and local communities to form interagency working groups that guide the implementation of a robust set of career pathways services.

Role of State Career Pathways Partners in Strengthening Workforce Development Systems

The use of a career pathways approach calls for aligned workforce investment, education, and economic development systems at the state and local levels. To obtain this alignment, state and local partners must work together to organize and support the high-quality, coordinated workforce, education, and training services that underlie a career pathways approach. This alignment can be facilitated through the implementation of the key elements of career pathways services:

- Interagency and intra-agency partnerships;
- Industry engagement;
- Education and training systems;
- Policy and guidance;
- Funding needs and sources, and
- Data systems and evaluation.^{6,7}

These key elements provide a framework for state agency staff to organize career pathways activities and facilitate local implementation of career pathways. The development of state partnerships is a critical

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor’s Career Pathways Toolkit: Six Key Elements for Success (2011). <https://lincs.ed.gov/professional-development/resource-collections/profile-556> and Career Pathways Toolkit: A Guide for System Development (2015). <http://lincs.ed.gov/professional-development/resource-collections/profile-841>

⁷ Federal commitment to promote career pathways is documented in a second joint letter issued on April 28, 2016 by the White House National Economic Council; the Office of Management and Budget; the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, Transportation, and Veterans Affairs, and the Social Security Administration. https://careerpathways.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/04/27/12/12/Career_Pathways_Joint_Letter_2016

component of WIOA that affects the overall implementation of career pathways. States are encouraged to form career pathways interagency groups comprised of partners in workforce development, economic development, adult education, postsecondary education, career and technical education, vocational rehabilitation, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), employers, unions, industry associations, and other entities supporting individuals' education and employment outcomes. States' career pathways interagency groups have taken different forms (such as councils, task forces, commissions, alliances, or working groups) depending on states' governance structures and the responsibilities of the group. Career pathways interagency groups have engaged in activities such as aligning state data collection and services and identifying joint activities that can be conducted to support local career pathways.

Central to the implementation of effective career pathways is ongoing communication among partners. Communication must be structured and routinized to ensure that benefits to the partners outweigh any costs associated with the partnership. Also important are partners' public relations activities to communicate a vision of career pathways in terms of purposes, benefits, activities, and outcomes.

State partners can set a state's direction for career pathways as an approach for delivering high-quality education, training, employment, and support services. The partners can convey a vision that defines a state's goals for building a workforce development system using a career pathways approach. This vision should specify how local service providers can work together to provide comprehensive services that enable individuals to develop skills and attain the credentials needed for employment in a career pathway.

A state's vision can be communicated through various means. A "white" paper can be disseminated that describes the cross-agency goals for a workforce development system; the role of career pathways in developing this system; and the types of coordinated activities that local providers should employ to support an individual's access to and completion of services. The state vision also can be depicted in a graphic that illustrates the range of available services and how these services lead to education, training, and employment outcomes, or as a series of life stages related to education and employment outcomes. The dissemination of a state vision can motivate local service providers to collaborate to deliver comprehensive services to improve education and employment outcomes.⁸

In addition to communicating a state's career pathways vision, state staff play an important role in encouraging local service providers to use a career pathways approach to deliver education, training, and employment services. Local workforce and adult education service providers can benefit from messaging about the importance of delivering coordinated career pathways services that enable employed and unemployed individuals access to the variety of services they may need to attain their education and employment goals.

Considerations in Implementing a Local Career Pathways System to Support Education Outcomes

The role of education is pivotal in WIOA since many adults seeking WIOA-supported services will require education or training to access career paths that are in high demand in their communities. For low-skilled adults and/or those with barriers to employment, the availability of high-quality adult education services

⁸ For examples of states' approaches to communicating a state vision for career pathways, see Cotner, H. & Alamprese, J. (2016). *The Career Pathways Planner: A Guide for State Leaders to Promote Local Career Pathways Systems*. Bethesda, MD. MSG

is essential. These services should enable adults to establish career goals and a potential path early in their participation in adult education. Services should provide options for skill development that are efficient and effective in moving them along a career path.

This section focuses on the implementation of career pathways under WIOA Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. Discussed are actions that state adult education staff can take to support local career pathways under Title II. WIOA provides an opportunity for state adult education staff to lead the transformation of local adult education services into a well-coordinated system that is built upon strong interagency partnerships; serves a diverse group of adults; adopts a career pathways approach in program orientation, advising, instruction, and transition services; and leverages community resources to address the varied needs of adults entering these services.

In order to strengthen adult education services, state staff will need to assess the extent to which career pathways is being implemented by local adult education providers, and areas in which there are gaps in the use of a career pathways approach. The *ABE Provider Career Pathways Survey* (described below) is one tool that can facilitate the analysis of local career pathways activities. Based on this analysis, state staff should identify the types of training and technical assistance that can be offered to adult education providers to facilitate their use of career pathways in local services. Integral to states' continuous program improvement is the collection and analysis of data to monitor adult education providers' progress and achievement of outcomes and the identification of promising practices in the implementation of a career pathways approach. State staff also have a role in supporting local innovation as part of the program improvement process, and their monitoring of program outcomes and identification of potential practices that can be pilot tested and evaluated are steps that can contribute to the implementation of innovative approaches in a career pathways-driven adult education system.

Assessing Implementation of Career Pathways. An initial step in transforming local adult education services is the state staff's assessment of whether adult education providers are delivering effective career pathways services that impact individuals' education, training, and employment. [Figure 1](#) provides a framework for a local career pathways system that is based on WIOA Title II guidance. State staff can use the framework to assess not only the extent to which adult education providers are implementing career pathways as defined in WIOA, but also identify gaps that need to be addressed. Additionally, state staff can use the model to communicate to adult education providers the state's expectations for the types of partnerships that local programs should have in place, such as:

- Targets for recruitment;
- The types of intake, orientation, instruction, and transition services that are to be provided in a career pathways system; and
- The ways in which the components of the system relate to each other.

State staff can collect information about adult education providers' use of career pathways through various methods, including interviews with local staff, observations of providers' services, review of annual program reports, and conducting surveys. The *ABE Provider Career Pathways Survey*⁹ has information about programs' extent of implementation of the components of career pathways services and examples of the practices being implemented.

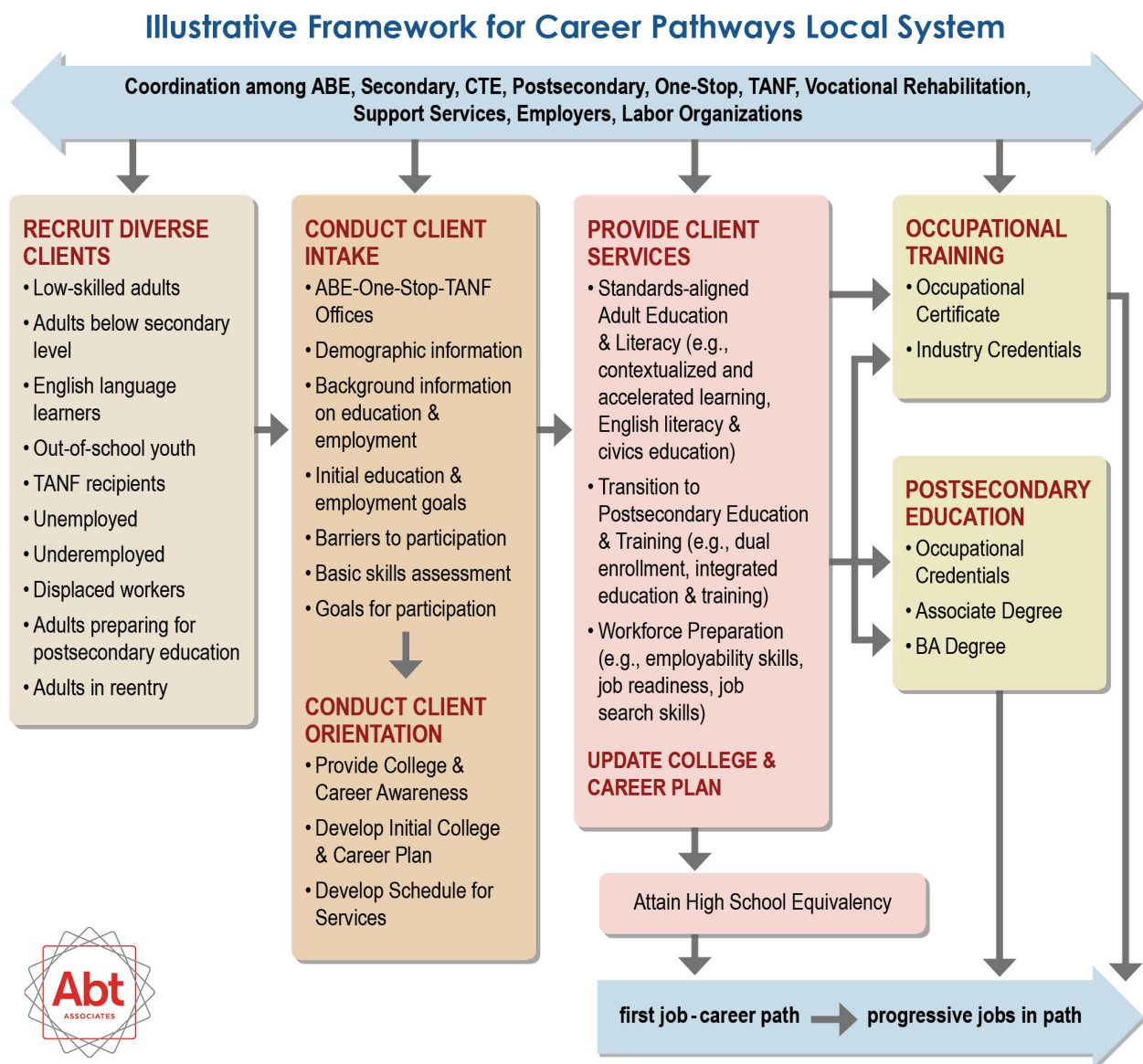
⁹ See Cotner, H. & Alamprese, J. (2016). *The Career Pathways Planner: A Guide for State Leaders to Promote Local Career Pathways Systems*. Bethesda, MD. Manhattan Strategy Group.

States that have administered this survey to local adult education providers have used the results to identify:

- Providers who are high implementers of career pathways and can serve as a focus group for identifying promising career pathways strategies or in developing training for transferring career pathways practices;
- Providers with low use of career pathways to determine the components of career pathways requiring targeted technical assistance from the state; and
- The types of local partnerships that need to be developed and facilitated through state staff’s work with partners in promoting local collaboration between adult education and other partners.

The survey results can also be viewed as baseline data for measuring the implementation of career pathways over time, as part of WIOA’s program evaluation activities.

Figure 1: Framework for a Career Pathways Local System



Determining Professional Development to Support Career Pathways. The implementation of a well-coordinated system of career pathways in adult education requires state staff support for professional development through training and technical assistance. The results from the *ABE Provider Career Pathways Survey*, noted above, and other data that state adult education staff collect about the status of local career pathways implementation should provide initial information about the types of career pathways activities that could be the focus of technical assistance.¹⁰ These foci include partnership development, delivery of college and career awareness, use of contextualized instruction, and transitioning adults to postsecondary education and training. For example, states are using LINCS online modules on partnership development and contextualized instruction as introductory training to familiarize local adult education staff with the principles of these processes. States also are contracting with vendors to orient adult education and One-Stop providers to use online integrated education and training curricula.

In determining the professional development to deliver to adult education providers, state staff will also need to understand providers' disposition about career pathways and their experience in conducting activities fundamental to career pathways (such as contextualized instruction). State staff's gathering of information about providers' experiences will help inform state staff in selecting the types of professional development that can support local career pathways services. For example, in planning professional development activities for adult education providers new to career pathways, state staff should consider conducting a series of orientation sessions about career pathways that focus on partnership development, getting to know One-Stop partners, understanding the local labor market, and learning about postsecondary education and training opportunities for high-demand occupations in the local labor market. The state agency's approach to career pathways professional development will need to meet local programs where they are in terms of their knowledge and understanding of career pathways.

Collection and Use of Local Data Related to Career Pathways. WIOA's evaluation requirements call for the collection of data on the quality of adult education service providers' implementation of career pathways, the quality of professional development, and learner outcomes in adult education services. The collection of data on the implementation of services is new to adult education reporting, and state staff can benefit from having detailed information about service providers' activities. This information can help state staff identify areas of local partnerships, coordination, and service delivery that need to be refined; new approaches that should be implemented; and lessons learned from the use of career pathways that can assist state staff in annual planning for funding and professional development. To gather these data, state staff should consider having local adult education providers report on a scheduled basis (e.g., quarterly or bi-annually) on the activities they are implementing as part of a career pathways system. This reporting can involve updating service provider plans concerning activities related to the career pathways system framework previously discussed.

State staff's collection of data on the quality of professional development should provide insights into whether adult education staff participating in professional development learned the information and/or skills that were the focus of the training, and are prepared to use what was learned. To obtain these data, state staff can ask professional development participants to respond to open-ended questions about what they have learned and how they plan to apply the information or skills in delivering services. State staff can also conduct a second phase of data collection in which adult education staff report the

¹⁰ See *The Career Pathways Planner* for data collection instruments to use in assessing career pathways implementation.

extent to which they have applied the information and skills they learned from the professional development and any barriers they have encountered in using what they learned.

Data on implementation of program services and quality of professional development can assist state staff in planning more effective professional development and technical assistance to support a local career pathways system.

Conclusion

WIOA provides state adult education staff with an opportunity to collaborate with state interagency partners to support a system of career pathways services in local communities. These services should result in coordinated education and training services that are aligned with the needs of employers, education and training that is designed to facilitate individuals' attainment of skills and credentials that can facilitate their economic well-being, and employment in a pathway that benefits individuals and contributes to the prosperity of communities.