

BUILDING POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM PATHWAYS INTO THE WORKFORCE FOR TODAY'S LEARNERS

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Today's learners include adults who are working and/or caregiving while they attend college — making it increasingly important for higher education to offer flexible, affordable higher education options that lead to higher earnings. Unfortunately, higher education and workforce systems are often disconnected, and students enroll in programs without clear career outcomes. At the same time, employers often struggle to find skilled workers. This disconnected system has contributed to the 43 million Americans with some college and no credential (Cohen et al., 2025). Career-connected higher education programs with embedded career advising, stackable credentials, employer partnerships, and extended learning opportunities help ensure that learners move more efficiently from higher education to employment. The various goals for learners should also be considered when designing on-ramps and pathways from higher education into the workforce, since some learners are looking to advance their career, change careers, or start a career for the first time. This fact sheet summarizes both the strategies and the key elements of higher education programs aimed at providing stronger career connectivity for learners in higher education. Further details can be found in CHEPP's full report, [Online by Design: Improving Career Connection for Today's Learners](#).

Fast Facts

- Among today's learners, an estimated 64% work while going to college, 49% are financially independent from parents, 40% attend college part-time, 37% are over age 25, and 24% are parents (CHEPP, 2023).
- Two-thirds of respondents to the 2025 Student Financial Wellness survey were working and one-third identified as "a worker that goes to school" rather than "a student who works" (Fletcher et al., 2026).
- 17% of respondents in the 2025 Student Financial Wellness survey were caregivers, 25% of whom were single parenting (Fletcher et al., 2026).
- There are 43 million total Americans with some college, no credential; 37.6 million are working-aged adults under age 65 (Cohen et al., 2025).
- 1 in 10 adult college students participate in credit for prior learning (CPL) (CAEL, 2025).

Career Connection Strategies for Higher Education Institutions

Workforce-Aligned Curriculum: A curriculum delivered in a higher education program that aligns with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in a specific career or the workforce. Learning outcomes are typically mapped to the competencies or skills that are mastered throughout the curriculum.

Sidebox 1. Example in Practice: The College of Health Care Professions (CHCP) is the largest provider of allied health graduates across Texas (CHCP, n.d.). CHCP started as an internal training school for the Texas Medical Center and now provides clinical experience at over 2,300 sites in Texas. Its roots and continued focus are to ensure the curricula produce graduates who are career ready. To keep curricula up-to-date and career relevant, CHCP has an employer advisory committee for each program and assesses the skills learners will actually use in their externships. There is a continuous feedback loop with employers through the advisory committees that informs curriculum design. During clinical externships at employer sites, students are able to embed short-term credentials in their associated degree program. This enables them to simultaneously improve their job prospects and earnings potential as they move through their program. This approach has resulted in:

- 82% retention rate.
- 81% job placement rate.
- Graduates hired by over 5,000 employers.
- Earnings increase of \$31,675, on average, after certificate and associate degree completion (Thurston & Reese, 2025).

- **Skills Assessment & Mapping:** Assesses the skills and experiences that learners have and maps them to their career interests to help design the right program and course of study to meet their needs and aims.
- **Career Exploration:** Encourages learners or job seekers to explore their career options and understand what industries or careers they can pursue with their degree/credential.
- **Career Exposure:** Raises awareness about careers and specific jobs, helping job seekers gain an understanding about a career or industry of interest.
- **Career Services:** Traditional career services found at most higher education institutions, including but not limited to resume development, interview preparation, and workshops on professional development topics.
- **Career Advising:** Personalized coaching that tailors advising to the learner's desired career, aimed at helping job seekers navigate career options, the job market, and land a career in their desired field.
- **Work-Based Learning:** Real-world applications of learning, where learners can build practical skills through workplace training or experiential learning, including through apprenticeships, internships, externships, project-based learning, co-ops, and job simulations.

Sidebox 2. Example in Practice: Gateway U's Teacher Apprenticeship Network is focused on helping aspiring teachers who are already working in a school system earn the skills and credentials needed to become certified in New Jersey (CHEPP, 2025). Learners earn their degree from SNHU while receiving wraparound supports from Gateway U, a nonprofit organization (Gateway U, n.d.). The program was started to create pathways for returning learners who already have experience in a school setting. SNHU's competency-based degree program is self-paced and offers a fast and affordable pathway to a teaching certification. The comprehensive wraparound supports provided by Gateway U are what makes this program stand out in helping learners reach their career goals. Learners are paired with an academic advisor based on their unique needs, interests, and career paths. They receive career support and one-on-one coaching and are connected with community resources for further support. Once learners earn their degree, they are connected with the teacher apprenticeship network, which plays a crucial intermediary role, helping learners navigate their licensure exams, the certification process, and job placement.

Key Elements of Higher Education Programs that Create Workforce Connectivity

- Authentic workforce opportunities.
- Technical and durable skill development.
- Respect and validation of learners' existing skills.
- Pathways through career connection strategies.
- Paid opportunities.
- Paired with comprehensive supports.
- Embedded into existing commitments.
- Clear goals.
- Good data practices.

Complementary Efforts that Help Connect Higher Education to Work

- 1. Structured Program Pathways** with clear course sequences and course requirements, embedded credentials, transparent transfer pathways, anticipated time-to-completion aligned with pacing, and expected career outcomes.
- 2. Stackable Credentials** serve as building blocks towards degrees or additional professional opportunities by providing credit and validation of short-term learning outcomes. When possible, they should also be transferable to multiple degrees, paired with credit for prior learning (CPL), and/or applicable to multiple professions. Effective stackable credentials can create opportunities for learners to enter (or advance in) the workforce more quickly while continuing to pursue their degree program.

Sidebox 3. Example in Practice: SNHU's Transfer Pathways Increase Stackability

Culture of Acceptance

SNHU staff approach the transfer credit process with a mindset that seeks to accept credits, apply them to a major, and help learners navigate toward a path that will maximize their credits. SNHU maintains an internal database that helps speed up and automate the CPL process for learners from over 100 different non-institutional sources of relevant experience, skills, and training that can equate to college credit (CHEPP, 2024). When evaluating credits, SNHU has adopted an informal 70%/50% rule: credits from courses that align 70% or more with SNHU's own course will be accepted; credits from courses that align over 50% must have a compelling reason to be rejected (CHEPP, 2024). SNHU also has a more generous approach than many institutions regarding minimum grades and accreditation, accepting C grades and making no distinction about the quality of credits across all federally recognized accreditors (CHEPP, 2024).

Ample Staffing and Support to Reduce Learner Burdens

SNHU delivers transcript evaluations within two to three days (CHEPP, 2024). Timely reviews have been made possible by a large increase in staffing over the past decade. Over 150 full-time staff are dedicated to evaluating 10,000 transcripts each year, up from a team of 25 in the past 10 years (CHEPP, 2024). Additionally, the university employs 556 admission counselors and 969 academic advisors who engage solely with online learners and help them navigate the transfer process (CHEPP, 2024). For example, staff request transcripts from previous institutions on the learner's behalf and pay the transcript request fees. SNHU has also expanded its articulation agreements with its frequent transfer partners and community college systems, offering articulation agreements that cover 478 campuses nationally (CHEPP, 2024). These practices reduce the uncertainty about what credits will be accepted and how they will be applied.

- 3. Employer and Industry Partnerships** can improve program and curriculum alignment through advising on workforce needs and career outcomes. Employers can also play an integral role in skill development by offering internships, externships, other forms of work-based learning, and prospective job opportunities.
- 4. Wraparound Student Support** through continuous advising and services (e.g., childcare and basic needs support, academic and financial aid advising, career coaching) help students persist and complete their programs.

Sidebox 4. Example in Practice: SNHU's CBE Programs Delivered in Partnership with Duet and Rivet

Duet, founded in 2013, is a nonprofit that provides coaching and support for adult learners enrolling in Southern New Hampshire University's (SNHU) competency-based education (CBE) programs. Duet provides the wraparound support and resources adult learners need to succeed in SNHU's flexible, project-based CBE degree programs while balancing work and personal responsibilities.

A recent internal study indicated that Duet's model leads to accelerated time-to-completion. Comparing Duet's time-to-completion data to national benchmarks, Duet/SNHU students on average complete their associate degrees in 24 months and bachelor's degrees in 22 months (46 months for students who complete both their associate and bachelor's degrees with Duet/SNHU), compared to national averages of 80 months (associate degree) and 102 months (bachelor's degree) (Duet, n.d.). The internal study also included interviews with learners who reported that the model offers career relevance, since the CBE model enables learners to apply what they've learned in their degree programs at work.

Rivet School, a nonprofit coaching organization founded in 2018, serves working adults in California, Illinois, and Louisiana enrolling in Southern New Hampshire University's competency-based (CBE) degrees (Rivet, n.d.). Rivet School's Educator Pathway program works in partnership with K-12 schools in these regions to recruit and support incumbent school-based staff to earn SNHU's BA degree and become full-time classroom teachers. Rivet School provides 1:1 coaching for all educator pathway learners from application to degree completion and beyond, providing personalized support to help school-based staff earn their degrees and transition into new, higher wage, career track jobs. Among Rivet School's educator pathway students at SNHU:

- 83% successfully complete at least 8 credits per term of enrollment.
- 71% earn their AA in 3 years or less; 84% earn their BA in 3 years or less.
- 74% of graduates have secured a job within 9 months of degree completion based on self-reported data.

To Improve Career-Connected Higher Education, Institutions and Policymakers Should Consider:

- Increasing funding for career advising and navigation services.
- Expanding work-based learning options, such as apprenticeships, that allow students to earn an income while receiving training.
- Supporting flexible higher education pathways, such as online, hybrid, and competency-based education (CBE) that allow working students to access higher education opportunities.
- Encouraging employer partnerships to improve curriculum relevance and on-ramps to employment.
- Improving transfer credit systems.
- Embedding stackable credentials within program pathways.
- Investing in data systems to better track employment and earnings outcomes.

Federal Policy Recommendations

- Allow the use of Title IV aid and military benefits for credit for prior learning (CPL) assessments, with some guardrails to ensure that the fees charged for such assessments are reasonable and reflect the costs of assessment and time spent preparing (e.g., such as proposed in the Credit for Prior Learning Act and the Military Learning for Credit Act).
- Authorize a robust CBE demonstration program that rigorously evaluates learner experiences and outcomes in a variety of models (e.g., such as proposed in the Empowering Learners Through Competency-Based Education Act).
- Increase Section 127 to further incentivize employers to pay for employee higher education programs.

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