



April 4, 2012

Dear Colleagues:

This letter highlights the joint commitment of the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor to promote the use of career pathways approaches as a promising strategy to help adults acquire marketable skills and industry-recognized credentials through better alignment of education, training and employment, and human and social services among public agencies and with employers. The Departments encourage states to align state resources to support integrated service delivery across Federal and state funding streams and to ensure that interested partners and agencies – whether focused on education, workforce development or human and social services – are aware of this joint commitment for improved collaboration and coordination across programs and funding sources.

As demand for skilled workers increases, the educational attainment level of American workers is declining and some skilled jobs go unfilled. At our current rate of postsecondary graduation, the country will be short over three million postsecondary graduates to fill those jobs by 2018. Increasing the skills of American workers is an economic and business imperative.

Too often our systems for preparing low-skilled youth and adults with marketable and in-demand skills can be complex and difficult to navigate for students, job seekers and employers. Career pathway approaches can offer an efficient and customer-centered approach to training and education by successfully articulating the necessary adult basic education, occupational training, postsecondary education, career and academic advising, and supportive services to enter and progress in a career.

While there are a number of definitions of career pathways, this term generally refers to a *series of connected education and training strategies and support services that enable individuals to secure industry relevant certification and obtain employment within an occupational area and to advance to higher levels of future education and employment in that area*. While our understanding will be further strengthened by research and experience, what we have learned from our investments in this area, in addition to States' efforts in career pathways leads us to believe that essential components of a career pathways approach should include the following:

- Alignment of secondary and postsecondary education with workforce development systems and human services;
- Rigorous, sequential, connected, and efficient curricula, that “bridges” courses to connect basic education and skills training and integrate education and training;
- Multiple entry and exit points;

- Comprehensive support services, including career counseling, child care and transportation;
- Financial supports or flexibility to accommodate the demands of the labor market in order to allow individuals to meet their ongoing financial needs and obligations;
- Specific focus on local workforce needs, aligned with the skill needs of targeted industry sectors important to local, regional or state economies, and reflective of the active engagement of employers;
- Curriculum and instructional strategies appropriate for adults that make work a central context for learning and work readiness skills;
- Credit for prior learning and other strategies that accelerate the educational and career advancement of the participant;
- Organized services to meet the particular needs of adults, including accommodating work schedules with flexible and non-semester-based scheduling, alternative class times and locations, and the innovative use of technology;
- Services that have among their goals a focus on secondary and postsecondary industry recognized credentials, sector specific employment, and advancement over time in education and employment within a sector; and,
- Is founded upon and managed through a collaborative partnership among workforce, education, human service agencies, business, and other community stakeholders.

The Departments encourage state, local, and tribal policymakers to use career pathways approaches to promote alignment among their public workforce, education and social and human services systems. The principles of a career pathways approach support integrated service delivery and strong linkages to local and regional employers. These principles are further outlined in the attachment enclosed with this letter.

The Departments are also taking steps to incorporate career pathways approaches into a wide range of program investments, evaluation and research activities, and technical assistance efforts. A few examples include:

- In an effort funded by the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, a large-scale evaluation of career pathways programs – Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) – is underway. This study will test promising approaches within a rigorous evaluation framework in an effort to produce strong evidence of effectiveness. More information on ISIS can be reviewed at <http://www.projectisis.org>.
- To study the efficacy of the framework, the Departments of Labor and Education launched a one-year Career Pathways Initiative in June 2010, funding nine states and two tribal entities to develop sustainable career pathways and promote linkages among system partners. As a result of the Career Pathways Initiative, the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration produced a set of technical assistance tools, webinars, and resources to help state, local, and tribal policymakers successfully implement career pathways approaches, including a detailed overview of each grantee's work. The resources are available at www.learnwork.workforce3one.org.

- The Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education funds the Designing Instruction for Career Pathways initiative, which seeks to assist state and local adult education providers develop and deliver adult career pathways programs. The website, <http://www.acp-sc.org>, features technical assistance resources, policy briefs, and the latest research on the effectiveness of career pathways.

We urge policymakers to ensure that interested partners and agencies are aware of this joint commitment for improved coordination across systems and work collaboratively to promote the use of career pathways approaches to help American workers advance successfully in the labor market.

Sincerely,

/s/

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/s/

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/s/

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Enclosure

Attachment: Guiding Principles for Developing Comprehensive Career Pathways Systems

This attachment outlines six key activities that state, local and tribal policy-makers can undertake to support the development of successful career pathways programs. One of the hallmarks of career pathways is that it provides a systemic strategy for integrating educational instruction, workforce development, and human services and linking them to labor market trends and employer needs. Connecting the traditional “silos” of education, labor, and human services to form a coherent system facilitates the development of programs that provide a holistic, comprehensive and coordinated set of educational and employment services for individuals. These career pathways programs blend elements from different parts of the workforce, education, and human services systems enabling an individual to move seamlessly between school and work. The more the systems are aligned at the state and local levels, the easier it is to create a level of integration necessary to develop comprehensive programs and ensure an individual’s success.

The Departments believe the following principles can be shared to help states and local areas develop comprehensive career pathways systems. These principles represent the “how-to” of building career pathways and were developed as part of the Career Pathways Initiative (Initiative), a year-long technical assistance program administered by the Departments of Labor and Education. They are based on the experiences of States and local areas that have made significant advances in the development of career pathways systems and were further refined over the period of the Initiative to incorporate feedback from state, local, and tribal practitioners as well as subject matter experts in the area of career pathways.

Build Cross-Agency Partnerships: Partnerships are at the heart of career pathways and are essential to making them successful. Key cross agency partners at the local and state levels must be engaged, agree to a shared vision, and gain support from political leaders. Along with employers, State and local partners include, but are not limited to, workforce investment boards, community colleges, adult basic education providers, human services, economic development and community-based organizations and workforce intermediaries. Commitment and participation from the governor’s office and local elected officials is also essential. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and formalized.

Identify Industry Sector and Engage Employers: Sector-based training strategies that include employers in the design of curricula have demonstrated better employment and earnings outcomes for participants than more traditional approaches¹. Career pathways systems are designed using real-time labor market information and active employer involvement to ensure that training and education programs meet the skill and competency needs of local employers.

Design Education and Training Programs: Career pathways provide a clear sequence of education courses and credentials that meet the skill needs of high-demand industries. Key program design features include contextualized curricula, integrated basic education and

¹ See Maguire, Sheila, Joshua Freely, Carol Clymer, Maureen Conway and Deena Schwartz. 2010. Tuning In to Local Labor Markets: Findings From the Sectoral Employment Impact Study. Public/Private Ventures: New York.

occupational training, career counseling, support services, assessments and credit transfer agreements that ease entry and exit and promote credential attainment.

Identify Funding Needs and Strategies: Because career pathways approaches blend and align services from different government agencies to support an individual’s successful completion, innovative funding strategies that braid funds from a variety of public and private sources are essential.

Align Policies and Programs: Career pathways programs require significant alignment among workforce, education, and human services to ensure that an individual can move seamlessly from school to work and earn in-demand credentials. Since every state and local area has its own particular policy infrastructure, there is no single approach to creating the public policy necessary for career pathways approaches. States, localities and tribal entities will need to examine whether administrative or legislative policy changes are necessary to help individuals participate in programs, enable blended funding, or support the professional development of staff necessary to support career pathway approaches.

Measure System Change and Performance: Career pathways initiatives define desired system and program outcomes; establish how data will be collected, stored, tracked and shared; and analyze data and assess progress made toward achieving outcomes.

