



## FORUM BRIEF: Aligning Systems and Policies to Support Multiple Postsecondary Pathways

June 26, 2017

### Background

Postsecondary attainment has never been more critical than it is today. Globalization, exponential technological growth, and an ever-increasing emphasis on so-called “soft skills” place heavy demands on the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce, yet a lack of coordination between education and workforce systems means fewer students are prepared to meet these challenges. Even as postsecondary enrollment rates reach record highs, a new challenge has emerged: the “completion crisis” in which a substantial portion of students entering postsecondary education exit without earning a degree or credential, leaving them no better off in the labor market than those with only a high school diploma. This failure to support students to postsecondary completion disproportionately affects first-generation students, students from low-income families, and students of color.

Earlier in 2017, the American Youth Policy Forum hosted a [discussion group](#) of national organizations, research institutions, congressional staff, and institutional leaders to discuss the challenges and opportunities in developing structured and supported pathways to postsecondary credential attainment and careers. Building off this work, AYPF partnered with Jobs for the Future to host a Capitol Hill Forum to further explore the ways in which education and workforce systems and policies can better align. This forum brought together a panel of experts in postsecondary and career pathways, including:

- **Betsy Brand**, Executive Director, American Youth Policy Forum
- **Michael Collins**, Vice President, Building Educational Pathways, Jobs for the Future
- **Dr. Marcia Ballinger**, President, Lorain County Community College (Elyria, OH)
- **Dr. Nathaniel Easley**, Chief Executive Officer, Denver Scholarship Foundation (Denver, CO)

AYPF’s Carinne Deeds opened the discussion by outlining the policy context shaping the current national conversation on pathways. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that all students have access to a well-rounded education that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers. Additionally, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) encourages the development of high-quality career pathways. As Congress looks to reauthorize the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act<sup>1</sup> and potentially the Higher Education Act, it is critical to consider the opportunities to align policies and to encourage coordination across systems and sectors to facilitate the creation of multiple pathways to success for all students.

### Panelist Remarks

*Betsy Brand: Where the US has succeeded in pathways vs. areas for improvement*

Brand launched the panel discussion by discussing both what the United States does well and where the nation struggles in preparing youth for their futures. Brand highlighted the ever-increasing high school

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of publication, the reauthorization of the Perkins Act – the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act – has passed the House and is awaiting a vote in the Senate.

graduation rates for all subgroups within American education, commenting that – while racial disparities must still be addressed – progress is being made across the board. In addition, she reflected on the success of the “college-for-all” mantra, as 86 percent of high school graduates now immediately enroll in postsecondary education. However, Brand reminded the audience that the “college-for-all message sometimes is too monolithic.” Encouraging all students, regardless of financial circumstances, family needs, and long-term goals, to pursue four-year degrees without adequate supports has fueled the completion crisis. She shared the sobering statistics that more than half of community college students exit without a credential, as do 45 percent of the lowest-achieving students at four-year institutions. In Brand’s words, “We’ve done a good job saying ‘college-for-all’, but we haven’t done a good job in getting students to credential attainment.”

*Michael Collins: Behavioral economics and the evidence base behind guided pathways*

Building upon Brand’s points, Collins narrowed in on the evidence which indicates that the creation of explicit pathways from education to careers can improve completion rates. He briefly mentioned the evidence-based tools [available](#), before zeroing in on the foundational theory underlying pathways: behavioral economics – or the idea that “we can influence behavior by structuring choice.” Collins defined pathways as a shift from simply presenting students broad and often overwhelming course catalogs, to laying out specific paths they can take through postsecondary education that align with their unique needs and goals. Postsecondary institutions must “make sure that students are learning, that the learning is relevant, and that that learning is eventually going to touch down in a career.”

*Dr. Marcia Ballinger: Designing pathways “with the end in mind” at LCCC*

Drawing upon her experience at [Lorain County Community College](#) in Elyria, OH, Dr. Ballinger contextualized Collins’ call for a relevant and career-ready education. She emphasized the importance of surveying community needs and creating pathways that respond both to student circumstances and regional employment opportunities. In Dr. Ballinger’s mind, all postsecondary educators must constantly ask the question, “What are the outcomes that we are, in fact, trying to achieve?” Partnerships and programs should be built upon these outcomes. Dr. Ballinger specifically highlighted connections between LCCC and the local K-12 schools. Targeted outreach to 9<sup>th</sup> grade students enables LCCC to transmit critical knowledge on dual-enrollment and alternative pathways that lead to bachelor’s level credentials faster and for less money than the traditional four-year college route. Dr. Ballinger’s remarks highlighted the role engaged community colleges can play in building relevant and accessible postsecondary pathways.

*Dr. Nathaniel Easley: Leveraging partnerships to overcome the “Colorado Paradox”*

Dr. Easley spoke from the perspective of the [Denver Scholarship Foundation](#), a nonprofit that leverages partnerships with education leaders, elected officials, and businesses to help create pathways for disadvantaged students to achieve postsecondary credentials. Dr. Easley shared the context in which the foundation works – a school district with an 80 percent minority population and two thirds of students receiving free and reduced priced meals, located within a state that pays teachers the lowest salaries in the nation, and that invests so little in K-12 education that 60 percent of districts, primarily rural, can only afford to operate four days a week. The Colorado Paradox, as Dr. Easley defined it, is that many professionals with college degrees move into the state, but that “we do a poor job creating homegrown college graduates.” In this context, the work of the Denver Scholarship Foundation, which has helped to improve graduation rates from 46 to 70 percent over the last decade, is especially critical. Additionally, Dr. Easley is part of Denver Mayor Hancock’s [Education Compact](#), a public-private partnership of over 20 key Denver institutions. The Compact’s mission is to create a robust educational continuum for Denver’s youth, from cradle to career, where all students enter kindergarten prepared, graduate high school prepared, complete a postsecondary pathway and obtain a job.

## Moderated Panel Discussion

Following these opening remarks on the national context, panelists addressed critical questions facing the field regarding the alignment of systems and policies to support the notion of pathways.

### Jobs for now, jobs for the future: Creating pathways flexible enough for an evolving workforce

The discussion began with a question about the evolving workforce, and the ways in which a pathways approach can prepare students to meet the increasing demand for skills and credentials. Collins touched on the need for postsecondary pathways to be flexible, continuously re-evaluated, and tailored to local job markets. He advocated for “looking at local and regional employment opportunities, looking at labor market information, and really backtracking” – creating a variety of pathways that students can follow to leave their institutions with credentials *and* employment. In Collins’ words, students “need not only the specific skills for their first job, but also the critical thinking skills to be ready for their second, third, and fifth jobs.” Brand went on to echo this goal, arguing that the social and interpersonal skills components of postsecondary pathways must continue to be strengthened to ensure students are prepared for the jobs of the future, which increasingly require a robust academic and nonacademic skillset. Dr. Ballinger turned the conversation to technology, reflecting on the need for students to learn broad and transferrable skills that are useful across industries, and emphasized the “learn and earn” model as a tool for ensuring students have access to the most up-to-date skill sets for their desired fields. Ballinger argued that earning money while in school is not only motivating, but can also better prepare students for the working world. Lastly, Dr. Easley noted that we call it a pathway, not a pipeline, because pipelines leak, while pathways enable students to keep moving forward to flexible goals in an ever-changing world. Dr. Easley highlighted four essential principles that enable successful pathway creation: designing with the end in mind, ensuring educational quality, leveraging relationships for funds, and sustaining partnerships.

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### Enabling pathways work through alignment and collaboration across systems

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Dr. Ballinger began by describing the network of support around LCCC as an “ecosystem” that was cultivated over time. Specifically, policy-driven partnerships enabling credit transfer from community college to four-year institutions were cited as critical, as were dual enrollment programs with the local K-12 system. Dr. Ballinger also offered an example of using grant money from a partner to successfully implement an effective system of pathway supports, emphasizing that the data collected on the program’s effectiveness was being used to argue for increased government funding, “leveraging resources to better serve the community.” Dr. Easley described links between the Denver Scholarship Foundation and three key stakeholders: businesses, policymakers, and the Denver Public School System. Speaking first to successful business partnerships, Easley explicated three main strategies: (1) work with human resources departments to argue for the value-added of hiring well-trained students; (2) serve as marketing for businesses who will donate money to improve their image in the community; and (3) seek out opportunities for philanthropic giving. Partnerships with state policymakers helped secure matching funds for donations, and the public school system proved critical in supplying

data. He also noted, “It’s really important to have these partnerships in writing, so they’re not just based on one person and personality, but they’re based in institutions.”

### Career and technical education: Promising pathways, or re-branded vocational tracking?

The next question surrounded the idea that career and technical education (CTE) can be a critical component of pathways, but historically comes with skepticism. When asked their thoughts on the role of CTE moving forward, Brand and Dr. Ballinger both spoke to the potential of CTE programs embedded within high school curricula in promoting skill development and degree and/or credential attainment. Specifically, Brand referenced the [Tech-Prep](#) program created by the Perkins Act (1990), which made possible the first legislated pathway. The 2+2+2 model enabled students to combine career and technical education in high school with community college and four-year institutional work, culminating in a bachelor’s degree. In highlighting the benefits of the program, Brand explained, “CTE is engaging for students, and that’s what we really need to do – find ways to engage them in their learning and keep them coming back for more.” Building off this, Dr. Ballinger highlighted an emerging CTE pathway in Ohio, which enables high school students to graduate with industry credentials. She argued that the critical next step to support CTE in high schools is to ensure that these industry credentials align with postsecondary options, so that students can embark on pathways to earn associate’s and bachelor’s degrees.

Collins and Dr. Easley discussed the reasons they’ve come to view CTE pathways as an opportunity rather than a backslide, despite valid concerns over tracking. Collins opened by stating, “One of the most important things we have to do around CTE and tracking is to be honest with young people and say, historically, we did have a problem with vocational education being for some and not for others... but after being honest, we need to help them understand how the labor market has changed and how CTE has improved.” He highlighted the engagement and career benefits of career and technical education, ultimately concluding that it is distinctly different from vocational tracking and – for many low-income students – offers a particularly promising future amongst “their limited post-secondary options.” Dr. Easley emphasized that if CTE is to be an equitable pathway, it must be an acceptable and supported option for all students, not just those from disadvantaged backgrounds. He then offered his support for re-vamped CTE programs, because of evidence that all students “can pursue happiness with a current CTE degree.” He ended by echoing Dr. Ballinger’s thoughts on the next steps for ensuring equity and opportunity for students who choose the career and technical education pathway – namely, creating policies that definitively link CTE certificates and associate’s degrees. Finally, Brand noted that when done well, pathways integrate career *and* academic preparation so that students have a “both/and” education rather than “either/or”.

### Lightning round: Existing policy models and needed policy change

Dr. Easley launched the discussion of policy by focusing on the positives. He pointed out existing policies surrounding transfer of credits from community colleges to four-year institutions as a major support for pathways work, and then called for similar agreements to be created around certificate programs.

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*– Betsy Brand*

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Dr. Ballinger advocated for data sharing across systems. Collins spoke to the need for expanded non-Pell postsecondary financial aid, and the creation of more user-friendly information systems explaining pathway options to students. Finally, Brand called for the four pieces of legislation that impact pathways work – ESSA, WIOA, HEA, and Perkins – to incorporate a common language. She ended by

recommending sensible change in accountability systems: “The end is a good career. The means is education. Let’s make sure our accountability systems are measuring the end goal of a good career.”

## Audience Q&A

### How do pathways serve students who enter community college needing remediation?

Dr. Ballinger argued that “we need to think less about students being college ready, and instead make sure that colleges are student ready.” Using math as an example, she explained how career goals should shape academic paths. Quantitative reasoning and statistics options are sufficient for many positions, preventing remediation in traditional algebraic calculus from creating an unnecessary barrier to entry for postsecondary and career success.

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### Do students with disabilities have access to these supports and guided pathways?

Speaking from her experience at LCCC, Dr. Ballinger emphasized the critical importance of wraparound services and intersystem collaboration in supporting students with disabilities. Brand added a policy perspective, pointing out gaps between the supports required by the IDEA and actual practices in schools. Mandated transition planning starting in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and the ability to stay in public education until age 21 should make pathways work and collaboration with postsecondary institutions a logical point of emphasis for this population, but these opportunities are not being taken advantage of on the ground. Collins admitted that more work is needed to create inclusive pathways, and that the field needs to move in this direction.

### Do pathways allow for intellectual freedom and pursuit of a liberal arts education?

Dr. Easley launched this important conversation by definitively stating that intellectual freedom and career readiness need not be at odds. However, he emphasized the importance of being honest with students and families about the numbers – both the cost of an education, and the expected return on that investment in terms of annual salary. Collins then re-emphasized the importance of balance, and re-defined intellectual freedom as allowing students to choose the pathways that make the most sense for them, given full information about the costs and rewards.

### Is there enough space in high school curriculum for CTE to prepare students for employment?

Drawing on her extensive work with career and technical education, Brand pointed out the many ways that academic, social, and emotional learning can be embedded into academic and technical learning, creating a curriculum that’s especially effective in preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. However, she also emphasized that high school should be a time for preparation, not for deep technical training, and that the goal of CTE was not necessarily to have high school graduates prepared for technical careers. Collins echoed this by suggesting that high school should be a time to develop broader skills, arguing that providing CTE in a diluted form helps give students options while preventing vocational tracking. Lastly, Dr. Ballinger advocated for combining CTE and STEM education, presenting CTE not as an alternative to a bachelor’s degree, but as a step on the pathway.