

Enabling Breakthrough Programs

Working Group Memo

How might we create a thriving ecosystem of breakthrough programs and their enabling conditions so that all opportunity seekers can achieve lasting upward economic mobility?

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Opportunity Pathways Network Overview

The Opportunity Pathways Network (OPeN) began with a bold vision: a future in which no American who graduates from high school hits a dead end. With that end goal in mind, we set out to answer a nationally urgent question: *“How might we redesign pathways between education and work so that all people, especially those most at risk of falling behind, can achieve lifelong economic mobility?”*

We started building the OPeN with the belief that collective action focused on catalytic and well-sequenced investments is essential for creating a more robust education-and-work ecosystem. Notably, we believe that K12 systems need to be as central to this collective action as postsecondary systems and employers are. With input from the field, we defined three focus areas—data, navigation, and guidance; enabling breakthrough program models; and employer signaling and hiring—for philanthropic funders and impact investors looking to redesign our education-to-work ecosystem in ways that work better for all Americans.

Methodology

In 2018, we laid the foundation for OPeN’s theory of change through a landscape analysis and background paper. The paper was informed by extensive desk research; over 40 in-depth interviews with experts from across sectors and from across the United States; and input from an additional 50 experts and funders. That process uncovered three levers for change to improve education-to-work pathways:

- **Data, Navigation, and Guidance:** How might we empower opportunity seekers with the data, navigation, and guidance they need to create and dynamically navigate their journey—weaving together education and work throughout their life in a way that works for them and provides a family-sustaining wage?

- **Enabling Breakthrough Programs:** How might we create a healthy market of breakthrough programs that more seamlessly connect education and work and enable economic mobility?
- **Employer Signaling and Hiring Practices:** How might we make it inevitable that employers use signaling and hiring practices based on competencies, rather than proxies or pedigree?

For the current cycle of OPeN, we have prioritized two of these levers: Data, Navigation, and Guidance and Enabling Breakthrough Programs. We are integrating the third lever, Employer Signaling and Hiring Practices, into the other two levers since we observed in the pilot that “demand-side” (i.e. employer) considerations should be inextricably linked to all of our focus areas. For more information, you are welcome to visit www.opportunitypathways.org.

Enabling Breakthrough Programs: The Challenge

Over the past decade, we have seen an explosion in the number of new education providers designed to equip students with the skills to be successful in jobs. Their programs include coding bootcamps, such as those offered by General Assembly; adult skills training and job placement programs, such as Per Scholas and i.c.stars; and apprenticeship and temporary-to-permanent staffing models, such as Apprenti, Revature or Tectonic. The development of this new category of innovative education providers highlights that social entrepreneurs and nonprofits see a clear void in the marketplace for talent development and talent acquisition. To fill that void, they have introduced newer programs that more directly connect opportunity seekers to the types of skill development, financial support, wraparound services, and job placement that they need to be successful in the workforce.

Many traditional education providers are re-assessing their approach to equipping learners for the future of work. Community colleges are pushing to develop programs with greater workforce alignment (e.g., Amazon’s partnership with several community colleges via the California Cloud Workforce project), and a number of traditional four-year institutions are developing new programs or expanding on older models of industry alignment (e.g., the Cooperative Education program at Northeastern University and Paul Quinn College’s effort to create a national network of work-based learning colleges).

These emerging education programs open up new pathways for opportunity seekers and create better talent pipelines for employers. However, the number of learners completing these programs each year represents only a small share of the total market. By our estimates, only 23 million of the 97 million adults with less than a two-year degree are currently enrolled in some form of education or training program.¹

Closing the gap between opportunity seekers and available programs cannot be solved simply through organic growth of new programs or even the expansion of programs within existing systems

¹ Includes enrollees in Adult Onramps Programs, Bootcamps, Apprenticeships, Career Technical Education, College MVPs, and Professional Certifications; Source: Perkins Data Explorer, NCES, Strada ACS, Course Report, Urban Institute, Entangled Solutions Analysis

of education. Despite some promising successes, many of these programs face significant barriers to entry and barriers to scale in terms of recognition, validation, and financing. Our current means of assessing and supporting education and training programs create significant barriers to entry (e.g., formal accreditation) and restrict financing options (e.g., limits on access to financial aid). As a result, the growth of these programs is often subject to the whims of individual companies that take an interest in bespoke programs or of individual institutions that are willing to take risks and pilot new practices.

The uneven effect of this is clear. Most innovative programs, such as coding camps and other last-mile providers, are serving opportunity seekers who already have a bachelor's degree. If we don't change course, only those who already have significant resources, time, and connections stand to benefit. A range of workforce-aligned programs targeting working adults without degrees has begun to emerge—but many of these programs rely on philanthropic grants to fund their operations, which presents a barrier to increasing their overall scale. Instead of relying on one-off funder-grantee relationships across disparate programs to meet the needs of opportunity seekers, this emerging offering of equity-oriented programs requires coordinated investments that help build the scaffolding for a thriving, durable ecosystem.

We face a critical question: how might we remove barriers that prevent equity-oriented programs from developing and prevent existing programs from scaling to meet the needs of opportunity seekers? Unless this question is addressed head on, many individuals from low-income backgrounds—who have an acute need to signal skills and competencies to employers—will be shuttled into aging and obsolete training programs that neither meet their immediate needs nor their long-term aspirations.

Why is this area an important lever for change?

In order to serve more opportunity seekers of all backgrounds, we must support the growth and development of new education programs.

- Scaling innovative programs will require significant shifts in terms of state-level policies and regulatory oversight for accreditation, credit recognition, and financing
- Removing barriers to scale specifically for programs targeting low-income and underrepresented groups could address longstanding structural inequities (e.g., having time to be enrolled full-time in a postsecondary program) that make it more difficult for certain opportunity seekers to earn postsecondary credentials

Why is progress not inevitable?

The development and growth of breakthrough programs is not inevitable for a few reasons:

- Current accountability standards are oriented toward incentivizing inputs (e.g., seat time for credit hours, number of courses taken) in a way that slows down opportunity seekers'

progress and limits innovative models that focus on skill building (e.g., competency-based education)

- Innovative program models lack an effective means of comparison against traditional models given limited information and a lack of clear quality assurance standards. There is no means of validating the relative efficacy of innovative models with regard to learning outcomes, completion rates, job placement, and earnings after graduation
- Current financing models, particularly loans and financial aid, are often tied to inputs, such as the number of courses taken or participants enrolled, rather than program outcomes. This creates a reality where opportunity seekers incur heavy education costs up front without a clear expectation that they can recoup that investment through employment
- Federal funding (e.g., Perkins funding for career and technical education, funding through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) has been steadily declining since 2001, reducing resources for existing programs to try new innovative practices
- There is no uniform way to recognize credit earned, skills developed, or job experiences across different program models—making it difficult for opportunity seekers to switch between programs or create pathways that feature skill building across different settings

What's next?

The four categories outlined above may evolve as the breakthrough programs working group continues its work through 2019 and beyond. Further working group conversations will serve to refine our thinking, lay out next steps, and consider investment opportunities.

Resources and further reading

- Michael Horn and Alana Dunagan, *Innovation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, Christensen Institute, June 2018.
- Ryan Craig, *A New U: Faster and Cheaper Alternatives to College*, September 2018.
- Entangled Solutions, *The Future of Student Aid: Advancing New Models to Expand Access, Improve Quality, and Spur Innovation in Education*, May 2017.
- Tafaya Ransom, Erin Knepler, and Claudia Zapata-Gietl, *New Approaches to Judging Quality in Higher Education: Profiles of Emerging Methods Apart From Traditional Accreditation*, University of Chicago and Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2018.