



Staying the Course

Lessons from the Central Ohio Partnership for College and Career Readiness Expansion

AT A GLANCE

Cross-sector partnerships require a foundation of trust in order to withstand external shocks and achieve impact. This publication describes how the Central Ohio Partnership for College and Career Readiness Expansion evolved over a five-year grant period to create stronger collaboration across all partners and how the purpose of the work became even clearer in a time of national crisis.

AUTHORS

Sarah Hooker
Associate Director, JFF

Erica Acevedo
Associate Director, JFF

Molly Dow
Program Manager, JFF

JULY 2021

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to recognize several partners for making this report possible. Many thanks to the dedicated K-12 district and school leaders who shared their time and insights including: Pegeen Cleary Potts, director of alternative pathways at Columbus City Schools; Dr. Bill Wise, superintendent of South-Western City Schools; Dr. Philip Wagner, superintendent of Licking Heights Local Schools; and Dr. Tom Goodney, superintendent of the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio. We are also grateful to Jeffrey Lyttle, executive director of JPMorgan Chase, a longtime employer champion of college and career pathway efforts in the Columbus region. In addition, the authors would like to thank each district that participated in the project: Columbus City Schools, Groveport Madison Schools, Hamilton Local Schools, Licking Heights Local Schools, Reynoldsburg City Schools, South-Western City Schools, and Whitehall City Schools. A very special thanks to Dr. David Harrison, president of Columbus State Community College; Stephen Dackin, superintendent of schools and community partnerships at Columbus State; Sherry Minton, director of career articulation at Columbus State; and Lauren Jones, senior director of College Credit Plus Curriculum at Columbus State for contributing many hours of their time, expertise, and insights to inform, strengthen, and streamline the production of this publication.

We also appreciate the support and assistance of our JFF colleagues. Thank you to Joel Vargas for his guidance and editorial feedback, as well as the entire communications team for their quality production and design work.

This report was made possible by the Investing in Innovation Fund, managed by the U.S. Department of Education, as well as matching fund support provided by the JPMorgan Chase Foundation's New Skills at Work initiative and the American Electric Power Foundation's Credits Count initiative.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About the Central Ohio Partnership for College and Career Readiness Expansion (CCRE)

The Central Ohio Partnership for College and Career Readiness Expansion is a collaboration led by Columbus State Community College in partnership with JFF, the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio, the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and seven K-12 school districts: Columbus City Schools, Groveport Madison Schools, Hamilton Local Schools, Licking Heights Local Schools, Reynoldsburg City Schools, South-Western City Schools, and Whitehall City Schools. The project aims to increase college readiness and raise graduation rates by implementing early college designs. CCRE was supported by a five-year Investing in Innovation (i3) grant (# U411B150002) awarded by the U.S. Department of Education in December 2015.

This paper is the third and final publication in a JFF series highlighting lessons learned from the initiative. The first brief, [*Forging Regional Connections: The Role of a Community College in High School Transformation*](#) (2018), focuses on Columbus State's leadership in setting and implementing a new vision for K-12 and postsecondary partnerships in Central Ohio. The second brief, [*Waves of Change: Adapting District Strategy and Culture to Prepare All Students for the Future*](#) (2019), provides a case study of the transformation that took place in one of the participating K-12 school districts, South-Western City Schools.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
<i>Table 1: Dual Enrollment Participation by Income Group</i>	6
Central Ohio’s Cross-Sector Regional Initiatives: Important Milestones	8
Expanding Access to College in High School	9
Committing to Equitable Growth in Dual Enrollment	9
<i>Table 2: College Credit Plus Enrollment at Columbus State, Unduplicated Headcount</i>	10
Changing Roles and Structures to Support K-12 Students and Partnerships	10
Breaking Down Power Dynamics Through a New Approach to Collaboration	11
Building the Infrastructure for Employer Engagement and Work-Based Learning	13
Diversifying the Talent Pipeline	14
Doubling Down on Equity in a Time of Crisis	16
Pivoting to Meet the Demands of the Moment	16
Developing an Intentional Focus on DEI	17
Sustainability and Continuous Improvement	19
Scaling Work-Based Learning Strategically	19
Creating Opportunities for Inclusive Family and Community Engagement	20
Conclusion and Recommendations	21
Endnotes	22

Introduction

For over a year, stories of economic devastation, food and housing insecurity, and the challenges of remote learning have dominated headlines as the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in dramatic changes for education, businesses, and communities. In the Columbus, Ohio region, the pandemic widened existing inequalities, as it did across the rest of the nation; the people hardest hit were low-wage workers—who are disproportionately Black and Latinx—and their families. The effects reverberated throughout educational institutions, as attendance at the region’s most economically disadvantaged school districts dropped sharply and turnover spiked.

It was in this unprecedented context that leaders from Columbus State Community College, seven K-12 school districts, the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio (ESC), and JFF entered the final year of a major five-year initiative: the Central Ohio Partnership for College and Career Readiness Expansion (CCRE), which is focused on expanding the college pipeline through dual enrollment. The pandemic presented disruptions that, for many other initiatives, may have halted progress and reduced leaders’ appetite for seeing through such long-term work. Yet in Central Ohio, leaders understood that their goal of ensuring all high school graduates are prepared for strong transitions into postsecondary education and careers was more important than ever. They strengthened their resolve, sharpened their focus on the equity imperative of their work, and implemented sustainable systems—including online learning infrastructure—that set the foundation for deeper collaboration and enhanced outcomes.

JFF has been documenting project progress since the U.S. Department of Education awarded these partners an Investing in Innovation (i3) grant in 2015. As described in our first brief in this series, [Forging Regional Connections: The Role of a Community College in High School Transformation](#) (2018), this was not a typical college and career pathway initiative from the start, and Columbus State’s role as the lead intermediary was not a traditional one for a postsecondary education institution. Nonetheless, the community college was well positioned for this work given its long history as a convener of public-private partnerships to develop the region’s homegrown talent (see “Central Ohio’s Cross-Sector Regional Initiatives: Important Milestones” on page 7).

Early findings demonstrate the strong impact that the CCRE partnership has had on students. In a matched comparison study conducted by the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, evaluators found that students in CCRE high schools are taking college courses at a statistically higher rate than students in similar high schools—and the difference is especially pronounced for students who are economically disadvantaged and students of color¹ (see “Dual Enrollment Participation by Income Group” for a sample of evaluation findings).

Table 1: Dual Enrollment Participation by Income Group

Grade 10 through Grade 12 Students Enrolled in College Credit Plus (Dual Enrollment) Courses, 2018-19 and 2019-20			
	Economically Disadvantaged	Not Economically Disadvantaged	Gap
CCRE Schools	16.2%	27.6%	11.4 percentage points
Comparison Schools	7.1%	22.8%	15.7 percentage points

Source: Julie A. Edmunds, et al, *Creating a Future-Oriented Culture in High School: The Impact of the College and Career Readiness Expansion (CCRE) Project* (Greensboro, NC: The SERVE Center, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2021).

It is clear that the CCRE partnership has moved the needle on systems changes that benefit Central Ohio students. Strong cross-sector relationships and an ethos of co-creation have positioned leaders to face a new reality of economic recovery, which will require education institutions, employers, the social sector, and communities to work together to develop new workforce strategies and models for shared prosperity.

This final publication details how the CCRE initiative evolved over the later years of the i3 grant, how collaboration grew stronger, and how the purpose of the work became even clearer in a time of national crisis.

The narrative focuses on Columbus State’s approach to collaboration at all levels, as well as ways in which the institution has transformed to embrace high school students and teachers as an integral part of the college community. Interviews with college and K-12 administrators and other key stakeholders during the spring of 2021 revealed that Columbus State and its partners have built a foundation for sustaining and building on the work that began during the five years of the i3 grant. This brief is organized by key themes that emerged:

- **Expanding Access to College in High School:** Building a regional college pipeline requires commitment to equitable growth in dual enrollment, transformation of institutions, and the ability to overcome the traditional power dynamics that exist between K-12 and higher education.
- **Creating Intentional Pathways to Employment:** Given the CCRE partners’ North Star vision of preparing students for quality jobs and increasing the region’s economic

prosperity, leaders have had to develop new processes and structures for engaging employers as co-designers and decision-makers.

- **Doubling Down on a Commitment to Equity During a Time of Crisis:** Meeting the demands of the pandemic and responding to the national reckoning on racial justice requires resilience and adaptation, bringing a sharpened focus on the shared goal of improving the postsecondary opportunities and outcomes for students from groups that have experienced systemic barriers to economic mobility.
- **Sustainability:** Strong communication among partners has led to consensus on priorities and direction for the next phases of the collaborative work that will extend beyond the i3 grant.

The conclusion of the brief offers recommendations from CCRE partners that may be relevant for other postsecondary education institutions or regional leaders interested in engaging in similar cross-sector initiatives, including lessons learned about customization, transformation of institutions and systems, co-creation, and courageous leadership.

Central Ohio's Cross-Sector Regional Initiatives: Important Milestones

- 2011: Creation of the **Central Ohio Compact**, a broad coalition of K-12 districts, higher education institutions, employers, and public-sector organizations focused on raising the region's college degree and credential attainment.
- 2013: **Credits Count** program launched, with support from the American Electric Power Foundation, to develop STEM pathways in several Columbus City Schools. Additional funding awarded in 2020 is helping to expand the Compacts work with employers and align pathways to careers
- 2013: **Straight A Fund** from the Ohio Department of Education awarded to several Compact partners and the Pathways to Prosperity Network, focused on building career pathways in 15 school districts.
- 2013: JPMorgan Chase Foundation's **New Skills at Work** initiative invested in advancing the Compact's efforts.
- 2015: Investing in Innovation (i3) grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Education for the **Central Ohio Partnership for College and Career Readiness Expansion (CCRE)**.
- 2016: Joyce Foundation's **Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership** launched, focused on pathway development and employer engagement in several Central Ohio districts.
- 2020: JPMorgan Chase Foundation's **New Skills Ready Network** provided additional investment for expanding high-quality career pathways for students in Columbus City Schools in collaboration with Columbus State Community College and Ohio State University
- 2020: **Bloomberg Philanthropies** awarded funding for Columbus State to develop a five-year plan for the Office of Talent Strategy.

For more information about these initiatives, see JFF's first publication in this series, [Forging Regional Connections: The Role of a Community College in High School Transformation](#) (2018).

Expanding Access to College in High School

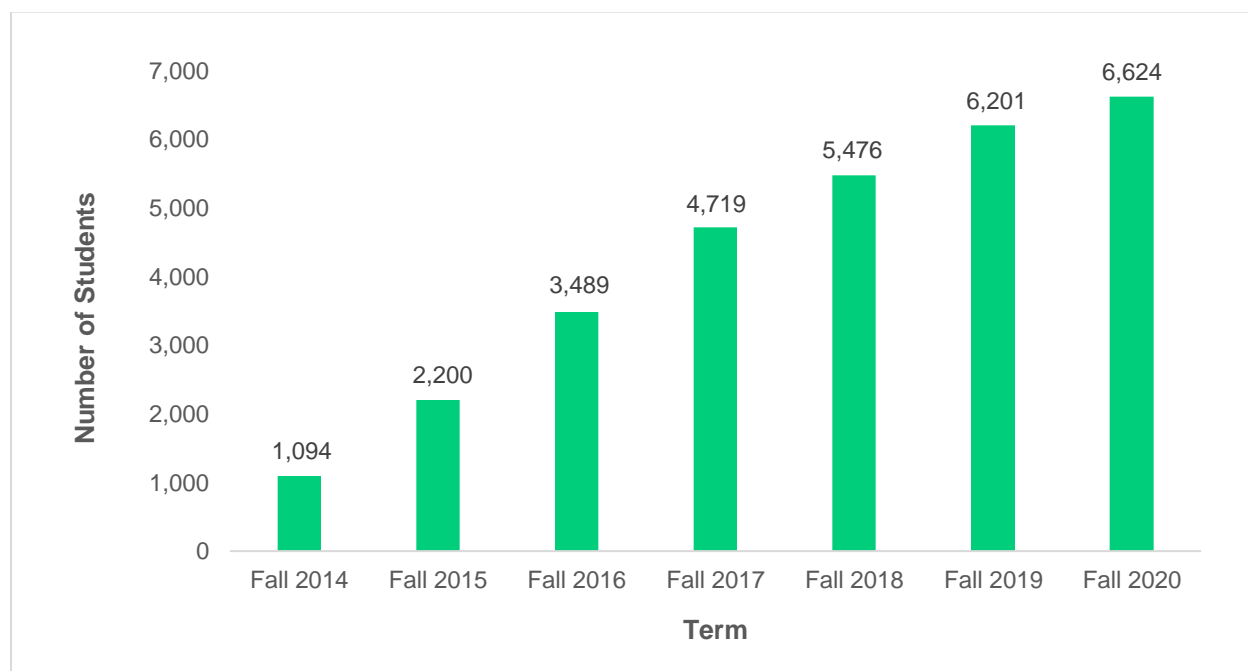
From the outset of the grant, Columbus State brought considerable experience leading cross-sector initiatives focused on raising the region's college degree and credential attainment and building pathways to in-demand, high-wage and sustainable jobs in the area (see "Columbus State's Cross-Sector Regional Initiatives: Important Milestones"). The CCRE initiative was the most ambitious to date, involving whole-school transformation through the implementation of early college designs across seven school districts representing urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Columbus State recognized early on that the initiative presented an opportunity for meaningful systems change within its own institution and across partners—a change requiring better alignment of structures, functions, and resources for successful implementation.

Committing to Equitable Growth in Dual Enrollment

In the years before the CCRE partnership began, dual enrollment students at Columbus State came from a smaller group of partner high schools that predominantly served a more affluent and, in many cases, academically advanced student body. The i3 grant sought to change this dynamic through early college designs. All the participating districts have a higher share of students who are economically disadvantaged than the state average. When signing on to this grant, the 16 partner high schools committed to doubling down on college readiness and wraparound supports so that more students would be able to access and succeed in college courses.

Columbus State's enhanced focus on reaching students from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education coincided with the implementation of a major change in Ohio dual-enrollment policy. College Credit Plus, which launched in July 2015, required all high schools and colleges to provide free dual-credit courses and create pathways for students to earn 15 to 30 college credits toward a college major or career path. Since the law's passage, the number of students taking dual enrollment courses (i.e., dual enrollment) at Columbus State has soared from 1,094 in the fall of 2014 to 6,624 in the fall of 2020 (see "College Credit Plus Enrollment Columbus State, Unduplicated Headcount" below). Students who are economically disadvantaged and students of color from CCRE schools have higher rates of College Credit Plus participation than their peers in comparison high schools, though gaps persist (see "Dual-Enrollment Participation by Income Group" above).

Table 2: College Credit Plus Enrollment at Columbus State, Unduplicated Headcount



Source: Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Columbus State Community College, 2020.

Columbus State has long advocated for improvements in state policy to expand college access. After a 2017 legislative change to the College Credit Plus Act required all participating students to pass a college-readiness assessment, for instance, Columbus State pushed for a waiver on behalf of the CCRE partnership. The waiver, first granted in the fall of 2018, was intended to provide greater flexibility regarding eligibility requirements for innovative programs that are “proposed to exclusively address the needs of underrepresented student subgroups.”² Columbus State has continued to advocate for long-term policy changes that would broaden College Credit Plus eligibility. The college and its K-12 partners remain committed to encouraging a wider range of students to participate in college courses, while also providing intensive academic support and progress monitoring to foster their success.

Changing Roles and Structures to Support K-12 Students and Partnerships

At Columbus State, reorganizing to support this new, substantial population of high school students enrolled in college-level courses required institutionalizing several key positions—along with identifying the right personnel to bridge the high school-college divide. Columbus State built a leading team structure to support the CCRE partnership, including roles responsible for coordination with districts, professional development providers, and evaluators, as well as staff focused on data and research. The efforts are spearheaded by Stephen Dackin, superintendent of

school and community partnerships, along with a team of three directors overseeing College Credit Plus curriculum, College Credit Plus student services, and career articulation. The college also has a dedicated team of College Credit Plus advisors, assigned to specific i3 grant high schools, who assist with guiding students' course selection and managing the logistics of enrollment.

Both Dackin and Sherry Minton, director of career articulation, bring unique expertise as former leaders in local K-12 districts, where they gained valuable insight into the priorities and pressures facing the i3 districts. Dackin served as superintendent of Reynoldsburg City Schools, one of the largest districts in the region; Minton was the career-technical director in South-Western City Schools. As Columbus State President David Harrison reflects: "We brought in Steve because we wanted to work with the districts in new ways, but we knew there was a language barrier [between K-12 and higher education]. Now, with the benefit of years of close collaboration, we've bridged those gaps. Minton, who is responsible for supporting career and technical education pathway development, helps districts address issues such as finding qualified staff to teach pathway courses and aligning pathways to industry-recognized credentials. She notes that one of the best parts of the work is rolling up her sleeves and collaborating with K-12 educators and Columbus State's career and technical education (CTE) faculty to develop aligned course sequences.

Breaking Down Power Dynamics Through a New Approach to Collaboration

Over the past five years, Columbus State has learned that successful development of student-centered solutions requires an ethos of co-creation, tapping the expertise of both college and K-12 faculty and staff. This culture of collaboration is reflected in the professional learning community Columbus State has developed for the college and high school faculty teaching College Credit Plus courses. Lauren Jones, senior director of College Credit Plus Curriculum at Columbus State, reflects when she first entered the dual enrollment space, the power dynamic was as such that some professional development events felt like the "ivory tower" was lecturing K-12 educators on what a college course should look like.

While upholding the rigor of a college course remains important, Jones and her team have shifted their approach, moving relationships from transactional to genuinely collaborative. Their professional learning strategy promotes relationship building and acknowledges the strengths that both K-12 educators and college faculty bring, with a focus on identifying what it takes to support adolescent learners' success in college.

This approach to collaboration is evident in an initiative called Third Space, which brings together high school and college English faculty in a “space” that is not exclusively college nor high school but a third, shared domain. With the Columbus State’s professional learning coordinator, English teachers have worked together over the past several summers to co-design instructional modules that will get students to the college-ready-level in English. A college transition course developed by this group will be piloted in two of the CCRE districts next year, and students who successfully complete it will be deemed eligible to enroll directly in the college’s freshman English class—a critical gatekeeping course required for associate degrees and transfer.

The strong partnerships built over the past several years faced pressure as leaders navigated the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the work persisted, supported by the strong culture of collaboration that had been established among Columbus State and the K-12 districts as well as the institutional transformations colleges had undergone in years prior. One key factor behind this resilience was the leadership of Columbus State President David Harrison, who has remained committed to building the college’s reputation as a dedicated community partner since his arrival in 2010. As Dackin notes, “Dr. Harrison knows that partnerships are between people, not organizations, and a shared commitment to those relationships is what really sets us apart as a region.”



Creating Intentional Pathways to Employment

While the i3 grant fostered greater alignment across the high school-college divide, leaders also maintained a clear focus on another key goal: preparing the workforce needed to maintain and enhance the region's economic competitiveness. Throughout the life of the grant, district and college leaders have underscored the importance of equipping all students for in-demand, high-wage and sustainable jobs. This emphasis on employment reflects the region's core values and underscores the pivotal role played by a group of Central Ohio businesses in spurring and sustaining investments in college and career pathways—which is especially relevant in the context of pandemic recovery efforts.

The college has applied its lessons learned about co-creation to its industry partnerships, as the college and the ESC developed systems and processes for incorporating the voices of employers into the design of career pathways at all levels. Education and industry leaders have also embraced a shared focus on diversifying the talent pipeline for the mutual benefit of employers, workers, and the community as a whole.

Building the Infrastructure for Employer Engagement and Work-Based Learning

Through the i3 grant, Columbus State and its K-12 partners had the opportunity to scale career pathways and work-based learning opportunities—including job shadowing, internships, and pre-apprenticeships—beyond select initiatives in specific high schools toward a more coordinated approach at the district and regional levels. Along with standard components of early college designs, such as teacher professional development and college-readiness skills, the CCRE partners focused their logic model on integrated grade 9-14 pathways and preparation for employment. In fact, work-based learning was not included as part of the initial i3 grant proposal, but the partnership later added it because it is considered necessary for advancing the region's economic development. By the second year of the grant, each school implemented at least one career pathway with integrated work-based learning activities. CCRE partners have learned that establishing and scaling a continuum of work-based learning experiences across seven districts requires extensive coordination and capacity building, alongside businesses serving as co-designers and decision-makers early in the process.

Over the past few years, the ESC has leveraged its coordinating function to build a centralized governance structure for employer engagement. After a change in Ohio legislation required school districts to have active business advisory councils, the ESC created a joint advisory council on behalf of all Central Ohio K-12 districts. Advisory council members represent

approximately 25 companies, and their role includes consulting with districts on in-demand and emerging careers, employer-valued skills, and work-based learning strategies. The shared advisory council is a win-win for both education and industry leaders. Bill Wise, superintendent of South-Western City Schools, underscores the value of the council in expanding employer connections—a role he considers especially critical for his district, which has previously struggled to build partnerships due to lack of leading industry headquarters within its service area.

Columbus State, meanwhile, has also invested resources, capacity, and leadership in engaging employers in program design. The college sees itself as well positioned to build upon K-12 career pathways and work-based learning experiences by providing entry points to paid internships, apprenticeships, and job placements for students. To stay up to date on industry trends, President Harrison convenes a workforce advisory group of representatives from Fortune 500 companies who are largely focused on talent acquisition within their companies. These employer partners benefit from learning innovative approaches for creating earlier and more equitable access to apprenticeships and on-the-job training opportunities.

Columbus State's Office of Talent Strategy provides a hub for developing employer-sponsored reskilling courses for companies such as JPMorgan Chase so that workers with jobs at risk of obsolescence can transition to other roles within the company. The attention to meeting employer needs has paid off. Jeffrey Lyttle, a JPMorgan Chase executive director who focuses on workforce needs in the Central Ohio region where the firm employs nearly 20,000, says: "The Columbus community at large really values Columbus State, and [Columbus State President] Dr. Harrison has a critical role. I don't think all employer communities really think of their community colleges in this way—and they should."

Diversifying the Talent Pipeline

Large companies are recognizing the business imperative of diversifying their talent pipelines and supporting employee well-being. Leading companies are developing strategies grounded in the triple bottom line: economic growth, quality jobs, and societal benefit. As part of this shift, employers are seeking to invest in creating career pathways and enhancing the racial, income, and gender diversity of their workforce. In this context, Columbus State and its surrounding school districts have earned a reputation as key partners in employers' efforts to expand their recruitment strategies and demonstrate their commitment to the communities they call home. Across the region, 41 percent of high school students are economically disadvantaged, though this rate is much higher in some districts.³ From the college's perspective, by working with employers to co-create more inclusive talent acquisition and development strategies, it can improve the labor market prospects and future earning potential of its graduates.

Columbus State's Dackin has learned that engaging companies' hiring managers as partners is a critical step toward changing pathways to employment. Pegeen Cleary Potts, director of alternative pathways at Columbus City Schools, says, as companies look to diversify their talent pipelines, she has seen an increased employer interest in partnerships with her district, where Black students represent 53 percent of enrollment and Latinx students make up 14 percent.⁴ Columbus State and the ESC have actively encouraged employers to reevaluate their hiring practices and expand opportunities by reconsidering bachelor's degree requirements for entry-level positions, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of community college graduates, among other strategies.



Doubling Down on Equity in a Time of Crisis

Pandemic-driven disruptions in learning, work, and the economy had an undeniable impact on the institutions, employers, and residents of Central Ohio. As many CCRE partners acknowledge, K-12 school districts felt the greatest impact. In Columbus City Schools, which has the highest share of students who are economically disadvantaged in the region, educators struggled to connect with students experiencing challenges with technology, inconsistent attendance, and mental health needs. Even in Licking Heights, a more affluent district encompassing suburban and rural areas of the region, the pandemic brought unforeseen levels of instability for students and families. According to Superintendent Philip Wagner, approximately 20 percent of the district's enrollment has turned over since the start of the pandemic and, as seen nationally, course failure rates have risen. Despite these monumental challenges, leaders' reflections in the spring of 2021 demonstrate an underlying sense of optimism, pride in the collaborative efforts that have continued, and a sharpened focus on the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) imperatives of their work.

Pivoting to Meet the Demands of the Moment

The shift to online learning inevitably slowed progress in certain areas of the initiative. Implementing structured grade 9-14 pathways was more difficult due to disruptions in master schedules and reduced course offerings, as well as schools' overall lack of capacity for taking on new initiatives in a time of crisis. In some districts, full implementation of certain career pathways, such as child development, was postponed from the fall of 2020 to the fall of 2021. Other districts moved forward with the introduction of new pathways but reported challenges with integrating work-based learning in a remote context. Even as re-openings allowed more in-person activities, stakeholders found it harder to make the case for employers to take on student internship or pre-apprenticeship placements in an economic downturn.

The pandemic had an uneven impact on College Credit Plus participation. Demand from more affluent school districts grew with the shift to online college-level courses, and Columbus State saw overall increases in enrollment. However, across the 13 districts, which have relatively high representation of economically disadvantaged students, College Credit Plus enrollment fell from 1,541 in fall of 2019 to 1,318 in fall of 2020, representing a decrease by 14.5 percent. Multiple factors contributed to the decline, including changes in teaching assignments as districts pivoted to accommodate online learning as well as challenges related to canceled placement tests.

At the same time, districts and college leaders pivoted rapidly to keep their collaborative efforts moving forward. Communication increased among all stakeholders, as the college and districts worked together to understand and address immediate needs in response to the pandemic. The

well-established, trusting relationships paid off, fostering collaborative problem-solving instead of placing blame for challenges. Staff from Columbus State, along with local college access organization I Know I Can, stepped in to help students and families receive devices for online learning. Columbus State also implemented new strategies to enhance college readiness and support transitions for the students graduating from high school during the pandemic, including summer bridge programs. The Forward Together program will provide scholarships, academic coaching, and success plans to help students who experienced a “lost senior year” during the pandemic to become college ready and complete a short-term certificate program. To help address students’ other needs, the college also brokered new partnerships with community organizations providing food bank services, as well as housing and transportation assistance. While most of the college campus stayed closed through 2020-21, Columbus State’s Mid-Ohio Market served as a hub for these services.

The accelerated adoption of new technology has emerged as a pandemic silver lining, shifting how districts offer professional learning and conduct efficient leadership meetings. Districts also began using learning management systems that have brought needed innovations. In Columbus City Schools, the shift to a virtual school model meant that the district was able to expand college courses to high schools beyond the i3 grant participants—which was seen as a critical step in advancing equity within the district. Online learning also allowed Columbus State to increase access to some of its most unique career-focused, dual enrollment offerings by bringing together students from multiple schools and districts for a single course section.

Developing an Intentional Focus on DEI

Educators, administrators, and employer partners noted that the economic and racial disparities laid bare by the pandemic, as well as the murder of George Floyd and other police killings, have brought a clearer focus on the equity goals of the i3 grant and related regional initiatives. CCRE partners have homed in on their priorities of closing gaps in college readiness and College Credit Plus participation for students from low-income families and racial and ethnic groups historically underrepresented in higher education. Columbus State leaders noted that the college has started to have more explicit conversations with its district partners about gaps in course-taking patterns by race and ethnicity, using data as an entry point for deeper conversations about equity barriers. As of the fall of 2020, in four of the seven CCRE districts, representation of students of color in College Credit Plus courses was proportional to their overall share of the student body, and the other schools were demonstrating progress in closing gaps by race and ethnicity.⁵ According to Columbus State’s Minton, “We can’t let the ball drop [on raising enrollment rates for underrepresented students in College Credit Plus]. It is something we need to keep working on, grant or no grant.”

The heightened emphasis on addressing equity gaps in College Credit Plus participation is just one example of how leaders have refocused their collaborative activities to address long-standing disparities in education and workforce outcomes. This change is evidenced by the fact that in 2020, the Central Ohio Compact—a broad public-private strategy focused on raising postsecondary degree, certificate, and credential completion—dedicated its annual summit to a series of virtual community conversations on race and equity in the region. The i3 grant has allowed the ESC and JFF to provide advising on DEI efforts to districts. Each district has adopted its own initiatives for leadership, faculty, students, and community members tailored to their respective communities. In South-Western City Schools, for instance, district leaders asked all schools to set inclusion goals for 2021-22.

Columbus State, meanwhile, has refocused internal efforts, as well as its collaboration with K-12 districts, through a DEI lens. Faculty have initiated collegewide trainings on topics including implicit bias and microaggressions. The professional learning coordinator for College Credit Plus educators has infused culturally relevant pedagogy into joint professional development sessions for high school and college faculty. Along with these changes, Columbus State leaders note that the college is becoming more self-reflective on its relationship with historically under-resourced schools and districts, as part of its overall effort to break down the power dynamics that manifest in traditional secondary-postsecondary partnerships. The College Credit Plus team is reevaluating the language college faculty and administrators use to refer to students experiencing poverty, for instance, and working with a consultant to examine and adopt DEI practices in K-12 partnerships.



Sustainability and Continuous Improvement

In the spring of 2021, with the i3 grant winding down as schools reopened and the economy ramped up, CCRE partners looked to the future. The strong consensus was that the work they have undertaken over the past five years is not ending along with the grant. Rather, the grant represents a foundational phase in a trajectory of regional collaboration to improve college readiness and completion and develop pathways to in-demand jobs. The ongoing focus on students from groups that have historically experienced barriers to economic mobility reflects a commitment to equity. High priorities for continued improvement include strengthening the work-based learning infrastructure and deepening engagement with students' families and the larger community.

Scaling Work-Based Learning Strategically

CCRE partners agree that building a regional strategy for work-based learning is an important next step. Employers and education leaders look to scale opportunities for high school students to gain professional experience through internships, pre-apprenticeships, and linkages to registered apprenticeships. Achieving this vision will require shifting mindsets about the potential of young workers and learners, as well as building greater capacity and agility within the K-12 system to manage and support work-based learning that is responsive to employer needs.

The ESC aims to continue building the regional infrastructure to coordinate employer partnerships across multiple districts. Industry partners will need to codevelop a process and structure that meets their goals, alleviates the pain points of cross-system collaboration, and results in a meaningful continuum of work-based learning experiences for students. The ESC also plans to continue advising districts and employers about incorporating an equity lens in work-based learning and developing differentiated, population-specific approaches, including a focus on opportunities for students with disabilities.

At Columbus State, the CCRE project has also paved the way for a new investment from JPMorgan Chase Foundation's global New Skills Ready Network, which will support continued efforts to scale career pathways and work-based learning in specific high-demand fields, in collaboration with Columbus City Schools. Columbus State also aims to align its partnerships with employers and workforce development organizations that focus on serving displaced workers affected by the economic recession. High schools and colleges will need to re-envision and redevelop pathways in partnership with employers continually as the pace of change in the labor market accelerates.

Creating Opportunities for Inclusive Family and Community Engagement

CCRE leaders recognize that they need to proactively engage students' families and community members as partners in supporting shared goals. As leaders at both the college and the ESC note, a lot of social capital is needed to improve communication with families about the region's college and career pathway opportunities and the workforce needs of the future. During the i3 grant period, many participating districts enhanced their outreach to families about college admissions and financial aid. However, less attention was devoted to College Credit Plus, let alone career pathway options or the value of work-based learning. Tom Goodney, superintendent of the ESC, says, "What we are doing is still not widely understood and not accessible to as many communities as we want to touch." The CCRE partners are recognizing that, as advisers and decision-makers, they must figure out how to better engage families of students from underrepresented groups to avoid past patterns of exclusion. As Columbus State President Harrison notes, nonprofit organizations and social service agencies will be critical partners in the effort to expand culturally responsive outreach and engagement.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Looking back on the achievements of the i3 grant, leaders have much to celebrate. CCRE has catalyzed a significant increase in college course-taking by high school students, especially among students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged. Moreover, Columbus State and its K-12 and employer partners have taken their collaboration to the next level, learning to co-create solutions and maintain a focus on their North Star vision despite the tremendous disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners are poised to continue working together on the next steps identified above, but the conclusion of the grant period also offers leaders from Columbus State a moment for self-reflection on the college's role as the central intermediary in a range of interrelated cross-sector initiatives that aim to build the region's future talent pipeline. Leaders are asking themselves how they see the ideal role of the college as an anchor institution in the community and reflecting on their interdependence with other institutions, organizations, and systems that impact the lives of learners and workers. Columbus State President Harrison has signaled that an important next step of the work is to build out the “nonacademic infrastructure” of wraparound supports that have proved so critical, not only to help students and communities survive the immediate crisis of COVID-19, but to address the impacts of systemic barriers to economic mobility.

When asked what recommendations they have for postsecondary education institutions or regional leaders interested in similar initiatives, the advice of the key CCRE stakeholders featured in this report converged around a few topics:

- **Set shared goals and a common agenda but allow for customization in approach.** The CCRE project's goal—increasing college preparation, high school graduation, and dual-enrollment participation—provided a clear focus for all partners. Columbus State also recognized the need to allow local variation in implementation and adjusted its support to meet each district or school's unique context.
- **Approach this type of work as a systems-change opportunity from the beginning.** Interrogate and reconsider ways of working—both within and across institutions—to better align structures, functions, and resources with the goals of the initiative.
- **Adopt an ethos of co-creation across the high school-college divide and between education and industry.** Break down existing power dynamics across sectors and recognize that no partner has all the answers.

Finally, as Columbus City Schools' Cleary Potts says: “Don't waste time on the fear of difficult work like this. Focus on the end goal and the impact it can have on the community.”

Endnotes

¹ Julie Edmunds, et al., *College and Career Readiness Expansion (CCRE): Impact Analysis Summary* (Greensboro, NC: The SERVE Center, University of North Carolina, 2020).

² Ohio Department of Higher Education, “College Credit Plus: Waiver from the Requirements of the College Credit Plus Program,” February 2021, <https://www.ohiohighered.org/sites/default/files/FINAL.Waiver%20from%20the%20requirements%20of%20College%20Credit%20Plus%202021.pdf>.

³ Central Ohio Compact, Regional Dashboard, “Central Ohio Region School Districts,” accessed May 26, 2021, <https://compact.chrr.ohio-state.edu/district/central-ohio-school-districts?dashBoard=1&irn=999999>.

⁴ Ohio Department of Education, “Columbus City School District,” *Ohio School Report Cards*, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://reportcard.education.ohio.gov/district/detail/043802>.

⁵ Office of Institutional Effectiveness, *District Summary Reports: College Credit Plus, Autumn 2019 and Autumn 2020* (Columbus, OH: Columbus State Community College, 2020).