



Modernizing Career Navigation in the U.S.

Policy redesign that puts people at the center and ensures informed choice-making

AT A GLANCE

To help all students and jobseekers better navigate the rapidly changing job market and make informed choices about their educational and career paths, the United States must make systemic reforms and strategic investments in career services and navigational supports. Drawing on the insights of leading practitioners from education and workforce development, this brief lays out a people-centered vision for career navigation and offers key policy recommendations for strengthening national infrastructure while enabling high-quality localized solutions.

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JFF's Practitioner Task Force
on Modernizing Career
Navigation Policy

The Policy Leadership Trust

About the Authors

The Policy Leadership Trust

The Policy Leadership Trust is a select group of community college practitioners convened by JFF. Together they draw on their expertise and experience to provide practical insights on what good policy looks like in education and workforce development. To learn more, visit www.jff.org/trust or contact David Altstadt at daltstadt@jff.org.

JFF's Practitioner Task Force on Modernizing Career Navigation Policy

In 2022, JFF formed the Practitioner Task Force on Modernizing Career Navigation Policy, as an offshoot of the Policy Leadership Trust, JFF's longstanding policy advisory council of postsecondary education practitioners. Members of the Career Navigation Task Force consisted of executives from community colleges, K-12, workforce development, and community-based organizations that partner with JFF on several major initiatives, including AWAKE, Back on Track, Pathways to Prosperity, the Policy Leadership Trust, and the Student Success Center Network. During a series of convenings, the Career Navigation Task Force drilled into key policy considerations around career counseling, technology platforms, and labor market intelligence.

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Call to Action

The career-planning process—from exploring the job market, career options, and skill-building opportunities to pursuing job leads—is confusing and chaotic for most Americans. The creation of new jobs and the destruction of old ones, a process accelerated by the pandemic and technological advancement, is increasing demand for new types of skills. Although the unemployment rate is approaching a 50-year low, shortages persist across critical industries and sectors, suggesting that labor mismatches and barriers to entering in-demand employment are still significant.

Services that can help students and jobseekers navigate the labor market and make informed choices about their career paths are not equitably distributed. While most well-resourced services are geared toward corporate workers and large employers, Black, Latinx and Indigenous populations, as well as other individuals experiencing poverty, generally have only limited access to underfunded and fragmented forms of support to guide their career choices, and sometimes they are advised to pursue unsatisfying career options.

Fixing today's complex and inequitable career navigation landscape requires a redesign and reinvestment in public systems so they are more capable of reaching and

Defining High-Quality Career Navigation Services

High-quality career navigation services consist of a collection of tools and other resources designed to help people of any age make informed choices about their employment, training, and educational options. The most valuable offerings provide timely and accurate information about in-demand jobs and skills and offer personalized forms of support on how to assess and represent job skills and experiences; develop decision-making, critical thinking, and goal-setting skills; and build professional networks and identify good jobs and employers. To be equitable and inclusive, career navigation services ought to be tailored to individuals' interests and talents and help people adopt a growth mindset, engage in self-advocacy, and combat barriers based on race and class.

supporting Americans most at risk of being left behind in today's economy. This requires federal and state policy reforms and investments to establish and enforce the necessary infrastructure, spur innovation, and incentivize deeper collaboration across systems to help more Americans effectively navigate the labor market and achieve their career and life goals.

A photograph of three people in a meeting. On the left, a man in a blue scrub top with a stethoscope. In the center, a woman in a blue scrub top with a stethoscope. On the right, a man in a light blue button-down shirt and tie. They are all looking towards the center, engaged in conversation.

Policy Vision for Career Navigation

To develop actionable policy recommendations, JFF called upon leading practitioners across K-12, higher education, and workforce development systems to cull their expertise and experiences on which career navigation approaches are working and how federal and state policies can enable and accelerate systemic redesign. JFF's Career Navigation Task Force and Policy Leadership Trust present the following vision for people-centered, place-based career navigational supports: **Systemic redesign that centers the individual and encourages place-based best practices and partnerships.**

The choice of which career path to follow must belong to the individual. Policy redesign must center people by promoting services that support an individual's goals and interests but also their skill sets and lived experiences. Education and workforce systems bear the responsibility of transparently explaining education and employment options, providing accurate information about in-demand careers and the return on investment of postsecondary options to guide decision-making. They should support individual choice and agency, not track certain individuals into certain paths based on their background.

One size doesn't fit all. The answer is not a uniform national platform of career coaching and tech-enabled services. Such a system would likely be too cumbersome to launch and adapt to changing times, too compliance-oriented to enable innovation, and too broad to suit local contexts and regional workforce trends and opportunities. Rather, what is needed is the right mix of incentives and capacity-building support to enable states, regional coalitions, and local institutions to partner and develop and sustain high-quality, place-based solutions, such as the models featured throughout this brief. Homegrown solutions can work, but leaders on the ground need models to emulate and quality technical assistance to implement solutions and maintain key partnerships.

Task Force and Trust members coalesced around three key policy design principles to strengthen infrastructure at the federal and state level while enabling high-quality localized solutions. In this brief, we describe each design principle, recommend changes to federal and state policies, and provide examples from the field that represent best or emerging practices across K-12, postsecondary education, and workforce development.

Key Commitments for Career Navigation Policy

The design principles and policy recommendations offered by the Career Navigation Task Force and the Policy Leadership Trust are grounded by a deep conviction in equity, economic advancement, and systems alignment. Policymakers ought to intentionally design policies to advance each of these three commitments.



Equity

It is imperative that policies governing and funding career navigation give special attention to reaching and supporting populations of learners and workers who have been historically underserved by education and workforce development systems, marginalized in the economy, and underrepresented in high-demand, high-wage career fields. This includes Black, Latinx, and Indigenous individuals, as well as individuals experiencing low incomes.



Economic Advancement

It is crucial that career navigation policies drive upward economic mobility of all students, jobseekers, and workers consuming services and supports. Information and services must be intentionally designed to guide individuals toward achieving education, skill building, and employment goals that yield family sustaining wages, rather than placement in low-skilled, low-wage jobs with no room for advancement.



Systems Alignment

Career navigation policies should foster deep partnerships and alignment across K-12, higher education, workforce development, economic development, and community-based organizations. This ensures consumers receive consistent, high-quality support along their career journeys and at critical transition points.

Policy Design Principles for Career Navigation



1. Unleash the power of personal support by professionalizing and prioritizing the function of career coaching across all public systems.



2. Integrate tech-enabled supports to augment the role of career counselors and coaches.



3. Develop the necessary infrastructure at national and state levels to foster systems alignment, employer engagement, and data-driven decision-making.

Policy Design Principle 1



Unleash the power of personalized support by professionalizing and prioritizing the function of career coaching across all public systems.

To address the unique needs of individuals as they make choices about their education and career journey, the nation must professionalize the function of career coaching, whether it's performed by an advisor, school counselor, teacher, or community mentor. However, to date, there are major shortages of qualified career coaches and counselors across K-12, postsecondary education, and workforce development alike.

Our systems need resources to build capacity and hire more qualified staff who can provide effective one-on-one support and advising that supports individuals toward high-demand careers. Policy needs to support the direct and purposeful integration of these roles in K-12 schools and colleges, as well as at one-stop and affiliate sites.

Where possible, advising should adhere to the “case management” model, in which coaches and counselors specialize in serving particular cohorts of students and jobseekers, usually based on their interests or program enrollments related to specific industries or occupations, like health care and information technology. Doing so enables coaches and counselors to gain expertise in key segments of the economy, build connections with employers, and apply labor market information to communicate job demand and pathway outcomes. Under this model, they can provide individual and family-centered career guidance that appropriately considers the student's or jobseeker's wants and skill set alongside the realities of the labor market.



Policy Recommendations

Invest in existing and new sources of talent to provide college and career counseling. The country needs far more people working within, across, and outside of traditional systems who are equipped to assist students, jobseekers, and workers in accessing and succeeding in high-demand jobs that pay family-sustaining wages. To ensure there is qualified and diverse career navigation staff across systems and local entities, policymakers must invest in existing talent in this space and in developing a more diverse pool of counselors and coaches who hold similar lived experiences and relevant social identities to students and jobseekers who are less likely to be reached by existing career counseling approaches.

- ▶ Federal and state dollars can finance stipends, subsidized employment, or supplements to current wages to maintain and expand a pipeline of qualified people in this field.
- ▶ Public resources can also facilitate “de-siloing” of college versus career conversations and ensure individuals receive the best advice to reach their desired goals. This can be accomplished by requiring career navigation professionals to be trained in both college and career coaching.
- ▶ Federal policy can also increase dollars for hiring or expanding the capacity of college and career counselors, defining allocation of funds as part of ESSA, HEA, WIOA, and other statutes.
- ▶ States can also set requirements on how institutions use revenues they collect. For example, Ohio authorized community colleges to set a one-time “career advantage” fee for incoming students that must be used for programs that directly benefit students and help improve their chances of graduating and securing employment.



Set standards for career coaching and invest in professional development to effectively implement best practice. While the recommendation above would increase capacity, it is critical that staff performing career counseling duties have ongoing opportunities to develop their skills so that the information and tools they use to advise students and jobseekers are reliable and timely.

- ▶ Federal policy across major statutes like WIOA, HEA, Perkins, and ESSA, as well as state-specific policy, should require and fund high-quality training and professional development, including anti-bias and trauma-informed training, workforce needs and labor data analysis, and training on the technology tools used to help individuals navigate the labor market and education and workforce development systems effectively.
- ▶ Such professional development should be made available to any staff delivering services to students and jobseekers and result in a series of industry-recognized certifications to demonstrate mastery of core competencies. The certifications should allow for some customization of required competencies to account for differences in advising specific populations on their specific stage of their career journey (i.e., in-school youth, as compared with working adults or returning citizens), as well as to account for differences in regional and local workforce contexts. Models include the Chicago Workforce Funder Alliance, defining competencies in postsecondary counseling in high schools, and Markle’s career coach training.



Encourage collaborative approaches to career coaching and navigational support. No one system alone can guide individuals throughout their education and career paths. Policies should foster strong partnerships among public systems to break down siloes, reduce redundancies, and smooth transition points for students and workers. Additionally, policy should incentivize partnerships with charitable and faith-based entities that have deep ties to local communities and understand and serve the unique needs of particular population groups (e.g., refugees, reentering citizens, and opportunity youth).

- ▶ To ensure systems are working toward the same career counseling objectives, federal and state policy should encourage the development of shared advising frameworks across systems. This means requiring key system partners to use similar instruction to inform their services, using the same data to direct students and jobseekers. It also means that entities share advising staff. This improves the likelihood that students and jobseekers are able to navigate separate but related education and workforce systems and make seamless transitions between education and employment.
- ▶ To encourage partnerships between public systems and local entities, policymakers should set financial incentives and include community-based organizations and other organizations as eligible entities of funding in related federal and state legislation.



Policy Design Principle 2



Integrate tech-enabled supports to augment the role of career counselors and coaches.

In an increasingly technology-dependent world, the United States needs tech solutions that can help increase access to and streamline career navigation supports and services. These platforms should offer information about available job opportunities and help individuals map career pathways and match their competencies, skills, and experience to relevant jobs. Well-designed and -implemented tech solutions, such as artificial intelligence chatbots and automated scheduling tools, can streamline service delivery so that counselors can focus on high-touch supports. Tech can also counteract the effect of counselors' personal implicit biases that may result in tracking individuals into certain career fields.

On the other hand, tech can reinforce biases through overly engineered algorithms or if the digital platforms do not represent the individuals accessing the services. To address the discriminatory consequences that tech products and services may cause, the design of these solutions should be equity- and human-centered. Tech cannot replace personal connection, particularly for adult and older clients.



Policy Recommendations

Create a digital transformation fund. Systems need resources to modernize and develop high-quality tech platforms and provide in-person support. Federal and state policymakers must invest in quality technology and equitable digital transformation.

- ▶ Creating a digital transformation fund would provide resources to states, regions, and institutions or organizations to modernize their digital technologies generally, with a particular focus on supporting career navigation services. This would include the procurement of new tech programs, development of new tools and platforms, as well as the provision of the professional development and technical assistance required for staff to appropriately use the technologies.

Standardize platforms at the state or regional level to encourage human-centered approaches and system alignment. Use of the same platform allows system partners to use the same data, which helps verify and align labor market information and creates more seamless transitions for individuals, so they do not have to start fresh as they move along their college and career path. Upholding the principles of universal design, the technology platform should be the same, but the user interface customized to account for different needs among particular populations (e.g., high school students, recent college graduates, and dislocated or unemployed workers). Technology designers must consider the user and ensure images, graphics, and platform functions represent the diverse populations that use the site and have the services, such as wraparound supports and language translation, to address their needs. Multiple user-friendly interfaces should be deployed (e.g., apps, phones, and websites).

- ▶ To avoid employing multiple career navigation platforms to serve the same community, policymakers should encourage the development of the technology platforms that are accessible to all students and jobseekers in the same community or regional area.
- ▶ Policymakers should uphold the responsibility of states and regions to control decisions around implementation strategy (i.e., whether to implement platforms at the state or regional level).



Ensure people have the necessary equipment and skills to navigate technology. Accessing tech-based solutions requires students and jobseekers to possess strong digital literacy skills. Policy must ensure technological resources can be accessed equally.

- ▶ As part of federal and state action, policy related to digital transformation and career navigation online services must also include directives and resources to support digital literacy (i.e., new directive in Title II of WIOA related to digital learning).
- ▶ Policy also should ensure equitable access to necessary devices and equipment so people can access career navigation sites. One example is through the recently passed federal infrastructure bill, the Digital Equity Act. The bill invests not only in broadband infrastructure but also digital literacy, relevant skills training and offers additional resources and devices for communities in need.



Policy Design Principle 3



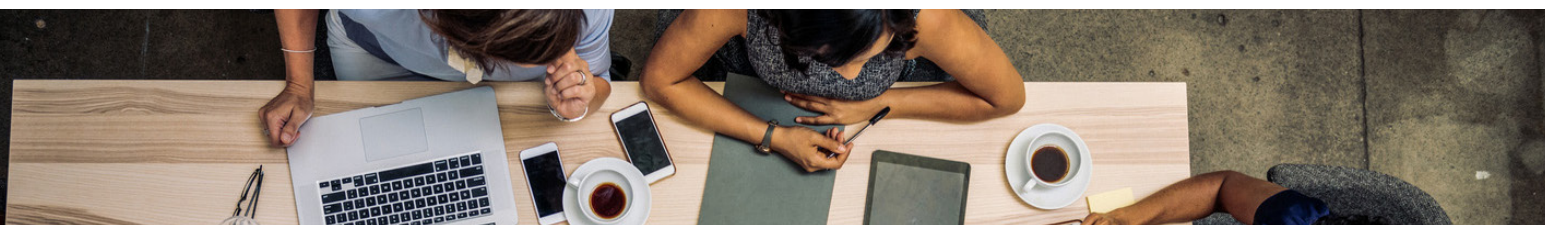
Develop the necessary infrastructure at national and state levels to foster systems alignment, employer engagement, and data-driven decision-making.

To ensure all individuals and populations receive high-quality career navigation services and supports, federal and state policy should fund and incentivize partnerships at the regional and community level in order to build a common understanding of labor market conditions and data, develop workforce-relevant postsecondary programming, reach historically underserved populations, and deliver consistently high-quality navigational support. Employer input and engagement is critical to ensuring that students and jobseekers receive guidance toward career opportunities that provide sustainable living wages, advancement opportunities, and benefits.

Policy Recommendations

Incentivize collaboration across key partners. K-12, higher education, workforce development, economic development, and community-based organizations must work together to encourage and facilitate equitable access to these services.

- ▶ To ensure productive partnerships, policymakers should set requirements with the necessary resources attached. Leaders can optimize these alignment efforts through combined state planning to encourage braiding and blending of resources and shared performance outcomes.
- ▶ Performance measures are another tool to incentivize partnerships and ensure education and workforce leaders are working toward the same thing. Federal and state policy should encourage career-related measures across education systems and programs to spur more career-oriented learning and advising while also driving collective action across systems to prepare learners to enter the workforce and advance in their careers. This can be done through federal statutes and regulations (i.e., Perkins V, allowing postsecondary career and technical education to demonstrate success by using outcome measures enacted through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) or through state agenda setting (i.e., Texas's Tri-Agency initiative, which fosters a joint strategy across K-12, higher education, and workforce development). Additionally, there should be a clear



metric across education and workforce systems for the delivery and impact of career advising and navigational support. This would incentivize systems to focus on career navigation and improve career outcomes for individuals.

Recognize and support the role of intermediaries. Intermediaries act as a nexus between education, workforce development, and employer partners. They also help to blend and braid resources and take on administrative burdens from public system leaders.

- ▶ Federal and state governments should recognize and invest in intermediary organizations to facilitate regional action on career navigation and pathways development.
- ▶ States can also support networks of intermediaries and connect them into state and regional governance, to strengthen coordination and impact.

Develop national data infrastructure that is reliable, timely, and accessible to guide employment and skills development decisions. Policymakers should focus on establishing data infrastructure that provides reliable, timely, and useful insights into labor market dynamics, and distributing information about the quality of education and training programs and providers.

- ▶ Federal and state policies should support deeper employer involvement in producing timely and accurate information about labor market demand, by providing timely and accurate information about their employees, completing surveys and other qualitative research requests to communicate their satisfaction and talent pipeline needs, and partnering with public systems to map career pathways for their industries. Federal and state policymakers should consider requiring employers to participate in these activities if they receive public resources or participate in state or local boards.
- ▶ To ensure industry voice is included at all levels of career exposure and planning, federal and state policy should expand business services under WIOA and reform current higher education accreditation models to include employers in the composition of advisory councils.
- ▶ States should develop a common methodology across education, workforce, and economic development agencies for defining and promoting quality, in-demand jobs and more consistent models for mapping pathways and identifying skill gaps. This will require modernization of labor market information to incorporate sources of real-time intelligence and employment data; a user-friendly, publicly accessible interface for examining regional and statewide demand for occupations, industries, and skill sets; and a commitment to analyze and publicly report data on workforce characteristics to increase transparency on racial patterns in high-growth, high-wage industries and occupations.

- ▶ Federal and state policy should support the development of data-informed pathways demonstrating how skills gained in low-advancement and low-wage occupations can be applied to critical needs within the national workforce. Education and training programs can build relevant knowledge, and in using labor data and occupation classifications, connections can be made between sectors in which talent gaps exist and transferable skills gained in low-opportunity work. These tools can inform targeted approaches to career navigation for individuals who are underemployed, have accessed postsecondary training or education, or are working while living below a family sustaining wage.
- ▶ Federal and state policies should establish and maintain a statewide longitudinal data system, governed by a neutral third party, that links individual student records across public K-12 schools, higher education, workforce development, human services, and employment. Policy should ensure access to the infrastructure and resources needed to conduct ongoing analysis of student education and employment outcomes, to identify key equity gaps to education and career success, especially in high-demand and high-wage fields. Data should be disaggregated by race, gender and socioeconomic status across all federal and state-funded education and workforce programs to make it possible to know how services are affecting people across racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines. Policy also should ensure routine and public release of findings to guide continuous improvement efforts by institutions, inform policymaking discussions, and guide decisions by students and jobseekers.

Expand the use of sector strategies. Sector strategies are a mechanism for cultivating meaningful employer partnerships within critical industry or occupational clusters.

- ▶ Federal and state policy should invest in and better support these efforts through grant-making and technical assistance, so employers can come together to support regional career navigation efforts in their community.
- ▶ Policymakers should also codify a framework for sector strategies and set quality standards and performance metrics to encourage high-quality partnerships. Intermediaries are critical to the success of sector strategies.



State and Local Spotlights



Redesigning institutional structures to align to careers and employer demand

Lorain County Community College (Ohio)

Informed by labor market alignment research conducted by the regional economic development agency Team NEO, Lorain County Community College developed a Career by Design approach to guide how faculty and staff support students in preparing for and entering career fields. Modeled after the college’s longstanding Completion by Design framework, the Career by Design approach refashions institutional practices at each stage of the student experience—connection, entry, progression, and advancement—to infuse career exploration and preparation throughout. The intended goal is to build knowledge transfer and encourage students to consider career options that align to areas of high need within the region. As part of this effort, LCCC is braiding funding to support short-term postsecondary and micro-credentials aligned with employer needs—opportunities that help individuals reach that first rung on the career ladder—and then helping students understand how they can build that credential into a pathway. Faculty and staff receive intensive training in cultural competency, as well as in understanding labor market information and economic and workforce development programs, so they are better equipped to advise students in their career and educational decisions.

State and Local Spotlights



Community-based partnerships to reach historically marginalized populations

YouthBuild Philly (Pennsylvania) & Worksystems (Oregon)

YouthBuild Philly provides youth who were previously disconnected from both school and work with opportunities to get the skills necessary to succeed in college and career. As part of YouthBuild Philly’s programming, youth participate in academic and vocational programming as well as preparation for the world of work. Students participate in programs at local colleges, businesses, and training programs to gain exposure to higher education and professional fields and to guide their career and college decisions. These programs require extensive partnership between YouthBuild Philly and key system leaders. Additionally, after graduating, YouthBuild alumni receive a second year of career counseling and support from postsecondary staff to ensure they maintain employment or enrollment and continue to progress toward their goals.

Meanwhile, in Portland, Oregon, the local workforce board, Worksystems, is leveraging public and private resources to invest in career coaches. While Worksystems cannot provide direct services itself due to statutory constraints, the workforce board is investing in the training and capacity of career coaches staffed by other entities. These efforts promote high-quality services that meet people where they are in the community, including college campuses, libraries, and other local areas.

State and Local Spotlights



Supporting transitions to college and careers via quality advising and tech platforms

Center for the Future of Arizona (Arizona)

Arizona is developing shared advising models and common tech platforms across K-12 and postsecondary programs, with the aim of helping high school students make smoother transitions to college and accelerate their entry into high-quality career fields. The Center for the Future of Arizona, a statewide intermediary, is playing a leading role to strengthen partnerships and break down silos between systems and their staffs. Leveraging a five-year federal grant award for the Education Innovation and Research program, CFA led the development and implementation of a “co-advising framework.” In partnership with 15 high schools and four community college systems, CFA piloted a distributive advising approach that emphasizes shared responsibility for students. Advisors and staff are using the same framework and guidance as they support seamless transitions for students from high school to college and career. The focus is on increasing dual-enrollment participation rates and the percentage of students prepared for career success.

CFA is also working with partners to develop a coordinated online career navigation presence. The sites aim to use the same platform, aligning labor market information, career pathways information, and postsecondary program options while altering interfaces depending on the user. For example, the state’s secondary system has a platform called My Future AZ. The platform is a customized version of the Pipeline AZ site, which offers critical career information. Several community colleges in the state are following suit. Importantly, user accounts and all associated information stay with the users as they transition from one user type to another (i.e., from high school to college or into the workforce).

State and Local Spotlights



Raising awareness about in-demand quality jobs through statewide coordination

Colorado Workforce Development Council (Colorado)

Colorado has a unified approach to career navigation efforts. Using the state's Annual Talent Pipeline report as a driver, key agencies came together to develop a common methodology for labor market demand and to develop a statewide career navigation tool, called My Colorado Journey, to guide exploration and decision-making for students and jobseekers. The platform was designed through cross-system collaboration and ensures system partners and entities on the ground are using the same labor market and program outcome data so that information is aligned and not duplicative or varied. Also contributing to the program's success are state investment and capacity building efforts, including the decision across agencies to designate education and workforce department staff time to the initiative.

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JFF's Practitioner Task Force on Modernizing Career Navigation Policy

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Disclaimer

Policy positions of the Practitioner Task Force on Modernizing Career Navigation Policy and of the Policy Leadership Trust represent the prevailing viewpoints of their membership and do not necessarily reflect the perspectives of all individual members.

About JFF

Jobs for the Future drives transformation of the American workforce and education systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We will continually reevaluate our efforts as language usage continues to evolve.



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