



Higher Education Innovation

Ensuring Agility in Response to COVID-19

Students and families are facing unparalleled challenges because of COVID-19, and they are seeking responsiveness and innovation from education providers. More than ever, an agile education system that provides opportunity and access to all learners will be required to meet these needs. Over the previous months, multiple stakeholders—students, families, educators, administrators, researchers, and policymakers—graciously gave time and perspective to Colorado Succeeds to identify opportunities and challenges emerging from the pandemic that could inform future policy. All the policy advances suggested here may not be feasible in the 2021 legislative session, but they do provide opportunities to learn and evolve our education system in the short- and long-term to respond to the crisis and look toward the future.

This paper is one in a five-part series outlining policy ideas addressing education opportunities and challenges that have resulted from COVID-19. [The remaining papers include: Learn Everywhere, Reimagining High School, Emphasizing Equity, and Aligning Business and Student Incentives.](#)

Career pathways provide students with knowledge about what employers are hiring for, and what skills are needed to progress, in a particular industry. Given this information, the education system should align to provide seamless opportunities for students to obtain skills efficiently, saving students from spending unnecessary time and money navigating the education system. Career pathways, coupled with an aligned education system focused on skill acquisition, results in a workforce that employers can count on for productivity and growth.

Currently, there are some career pathways where individual community colleges, in partnership with four-year institutions, have collaborated to stack one or more certificates into an associate degree that four-year institutions will accept for the first half of the core requirements of a specific major. For example, there are agreements that help aspiring nurses stack a certified nursing assistant credential into a registered nurse program, and then further into a bachelor's in nursing program. However, these pathways are negotiated between individual institutions, rather than being systemic across the state. As a result, many students do not have smooth and efficient pathways from certificate to associate degree to a four-year degree.

Key Questions

- ▶ Are there some career pathways that are especially important to build when re-engaging disengaged youth and recovering from COVID-19?
- ▶ Could applied science degree pathways be better industry aligned and more time and cost effective than traditional degree pathways?
- ▶ What role can industry credentials play in the final acquisition of a college degree?
- ▶ Are there innovative ways to finance the cost of higher education so that students do not carry all the financial burden?

Policy Ideas and Adaptations

Policy that would facilitate statewide pathways that are based on industry certificates would be helpful in further linking Colorado's higher education system to skill development. This would also further enhance the perceived value of these pathways with employers. In addition, it would be easier for high schools to promote pathways and for students to find their way into and through a wider range of certificate and degree programs.

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Along with further pathway development, additional action should be promoted to provide students with as much flexibility as possible to take classes at any institution across the state that will transfer and lead to a certificate/degree. Stackability should not be limited to classes but should extend to certificates and degrees that meet student and employer needs. Service areas, prior learning credit, stackability, and transferability are all large topics with significant detail that may need to be modified to not only modernize higher education, but also to address the current learning environment. Centering learners and their ability to navigate complex and costly systems will be critical in a time of much needed agility and responsiveness.

Innovative financing mechanisms that share the weight of the cost to acquire a certificate or a degree should be considered. Currently, too much burden is placed on the student alone. The burden should also be attributed to that student's ability to attain a job with their degree or certificate. This increases the currency of a degree. Ideas such as Income Share Agreements (ISA) should be further assessed and industries and institutions that wish to entertain ISAs should be supported through policy and other incentives.

Conclusion

COVID-19 changed the way Coloradans do just about everything. Colorado Succeeds' Practice to Policy Feedback Loop Sessions brought together critical stakeholders—teachers and school and district leaders, policy experts, and students and families—to learn more about the needs of learners. The policy ideas discussed above are a response to needs and frustrations highlighted from these stakeholders. As the country and the world adapts and recovers from the impacts of COVID-19, education systems and policies must adapt to become more responsive to the needs of students and families. Education must do more to ensure that all students have access to meaningful and impactful programs and opportunities—no matter where they are learning.

About Colorado Succeeds

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Colorado Succeeds believes that great schools are good business. We are a movement of business leaders who are invested in improving schools, changing educational outcomes for kids, and shaping the future of Colorado's workforce. Together, we support the educators who are innovating in the classroom and the policymakers who are changing the system. Learn more at coloradosucceeds.org.

Questions?

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