Colorado Community College System: Strategic Plan

Creating true industry partnerships to help more Coloradans achieve economic mobility through connections to regional and state workforce needs

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Colorado Succeeds represents businesses and leaders from across Colorado who are committed to ensuring that our education and workforce system helps more of Colorado's homegrown talent reach their full potential. For over 15 years, we've been working with Colorado's businesses to understand and address challenges and opportunities in Colorado's education and training system and align education and workforce needs. We envision an education system that allows all Coloradans to achieve a credential of value – one that gives them a family-living wage within six years of graduating from high school through traditional and non-traditional pathways.

To achieve this goal, Colorado Succeeds partners directly with Colorado businesses, industry associations, local chambers, and others. Through labor market analysis, direct employer engagement, learner pathway research, direct experience with the education-to-employment ecosystem, and policy implementation, we work to identify and address challenges in our education and training systems. In recent years, we've engaged in conversations in high-needs industries including health care, IT, Construction Trades, Hospitality, and Business Services, among others.

Through this work, Colorado Succeeds has identified the following needs from Colorado's postsecondary education providers:
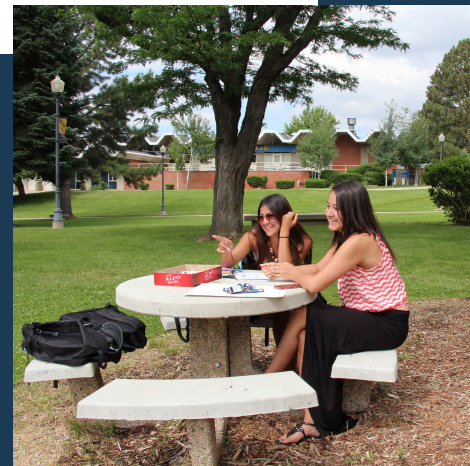

Ensure program offerings prioritize economic mobility for learners by aligning programs with industry trends.

Become the partner of choice by creating authentic industry engagement and greater agility to ensure curriculum aligns with industry needs.

Empower talent by recognizing skills gained outside of educational institutions and creating more flexible curricular pathways aligned with industry needs.

Harness the power of 13 by elevating and coordinating employer engagement and coordinating industry advisory activities.

Realize education for all by continuously reviewing and responding to data.

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Ensure program offerings prioritize economic mobility for learners by aligning programs with industry trends

Neither [colleges nor employers] collect, analyze, or exchange relevant data to assess the system's performance—the bedrock of a continuous quality improvement routine. For example, according to data in the Partnership Imperative, when asked what percentage of their student body are incumbent workers, 64% of community college leaders said, "I don't know."

In Colorado, the Colorado Community College System (CCCS) has done important research into 'skill builders,' students returning to college without completing a traditional degree or transferring to another institution. The findings of this research, as well as wage outcomes reported by the State's annual investment report, show that many Community College Students are leaving with credentials or experiences that are leaving to significantly positive outcomes. This is especially true for students pursuing two-year certificates and Associates of Applied Science pathways. Consequently, many of these pathways align with in-demand fields, including healthcare, IT, and Business. Unfortunately, this information is not readily available to students, making it more difficult for them to make informed decisions about their education pathways. This is particularly important information for some of Colorado's fastest-growing student populations, who have also historically been underserved and minoritized, including first-generation, low-income students, and Latine students.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Elevating and prioritizing pathways that lead to economic development and creating stronger partnerships with employers in pathways that lead to economic mobility and living wages.
- Using available labor market information to identify nuanced talent pipeline pain points based on employers' geographic needs (e.g., sourcing new hires, upskilling current employees, achieving DEI goals, etc.).
- Provide custom data reporting based on employers' shared pain points and regional talent pipeline dynamics.
- Working with industry to solidify, clarify, and communicate growth and professional development career ladders and incentives for employees completing Apprentice programs and earning academic credentials.

Become the <u>partner of choice</u> by creating authentic industry engagement and greater agility to ensure curriculum aligns with industry needs

According to data shared in <u>The Partnership Imperative</u>, business leaders believe community colleges are resistant to curriculum change. As high as 43% of all employers surveyed agreed with the statement, "My community college lacks the mandate or culture to develop programs that align with what employers are looking for."

Business and industry depend on the postsecondary system to train much of the modern-day workforce. Often, industry does not feel like the talent they hire is getting the right skills through their postsecondary education. Industry leaders want to be part of the solution, but too often, there is no mechanism for them to engage in existing curriculum development processes – or when they are engaged, it leads to boutique programs rather than systemic change. Colorado businesses know that they need to be part of the solution, but when they come to the table, their concerns may be overlooked or explained away because they don't align with academically-driven processes.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Creating a more integrated process where employers and faculty come together to define learning outcomes and ensure faculty has an understanding of the modern needs of industry and are embedding those needs into course outcomes. Identify and address the root causes of misalignment and address them.
- Having industry weigh in on the skills and competencies needed from students at different credential levels (certification, certificate, associates, bachelors) and verify that they will hire (or promote) graduates from those programs if curriculum is aligned with industry needs.
- Implementing these steps at the systems level where possible and appropriate so that industries do not have to weigh in multiple times.
- Looking ahead to where the labor market is going and co-create career and credential pathway maps alongside employers (construction example, below).

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Empower talent by recognizing skills gained outside of educational institutions and creating more flexible curricular pathways aligned with industry needs

More Colorado learners are graduating high school with career-connected experiences, postsecondary credit, and industry-recognized credentials than ever before. Students are also taking different pathways. Today, fewer than 50 percent of high school students are enrolling directly in college than ever before. Additionally, those who delay enrollment are most likely to enroll in a Community College.[1]

Many of the skills that students gain outside of the education system are valued by employers. Therefore, learners who enter the education system with meaningful skills that they've attained through credentials or work experiences should have those skills recognized as part of their education. Additionally, even when credit is accumulated within the system, it is not always recognized across the system. Colorado has created a complex system for transferring institutions that requires students to navigate hundreds of articulation agreements. Students must navigate these pathways both within the two-year system and across the two-and four-year system.

> "No student should have to retake a course that they've already taken or take a course that they don't need just because of some bureaucratic process."
>
> **– COLORADO SUCCEEDS MEMBER**

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Expanding access to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), connected to work-based learning experiences through the "College Credit for Work Experience" bill, to streamline education to employment pathways.
- Providing greater clarity and flexibility around "General Education Requirements" for all degree types: AAS, AA, AS, BA, BS, BAS. Create space for employers and college faculty to work together to reimagine general education requirements align with employer needs and truly produce the durable skills employers are looking for.
- Simplifying and streamlining the statewide transfer of credits between all degree types and all colleges. Currently, there are hundreds of articulation agreements for students to navigate. Since the Community Colleges are at the center of these agreements, we encourage you to recommend solutions for ways they can be streamlined for employers and students.

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[1] *Colorado Department of Higher Education, Pathways to Prosperity Dashboard/Data*

Harness the <u>power of 13</u> by elevating and coordinating employer engagement and coordinating industry advisory activities

Currently, employer engagement activities seem cursory and separate from senior leadership-level strategic decision making. Additionally, employers are approached by K12, community colleges, state agencies, chambers, and a multitude of other organizations to participate in workforce development activities, initiatives, and advisory groups. They are burned out and confused about where/how to engage in ways that produce a demonstrable ROI for their time. Simpler connections for employers with less duplication are essential.

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Having college senior leaders serve on the boards of regional industry intermediaries, business associations and other employer facing economic development groups to identify consistent opportunities for partnership and engagement.
- Elevating workforce development to a cabinet-level position at all institutions (and at the system-level) responsible for coordinating and centralizing all employer engagement activities across the college. Deans could have a dotted line reporting into this role for activities related to industry alignment and coordination. This position could also oversee non-credit coursework designed to meet industry needs.
- Supporting a robust, diverse network of business leaders and employers to engage through thought partnership, feedback on solutions and barriers, piloting and participation in policy and practice implementation efforts, and leveraging for strategic partnership opportunities.

> "The system is too complex for employers; we are committed to this work and even we don't know how or where to engage. We need to be clear about what we need from employers so that we can come to the table."
>
> **– COLORADO SUCCEEDS MEMBER**

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Realize [education for all](#) by continuously reviewing and responding to data

Colorado has some of the nation's largest equity gaps; the system simply isn't serving all students well. Additionally, traditionally underserved populations, including Latine students and students from lower-income backgrounds, are far more likely to be served by the Community College System. Because of this, the system has a unique opportunity to ensure that these students achieve economic mobility. However, without data, we won't know how to direct resources and help ensure that we are addressing the needs of these students. Additionally, students need more access to easy-to-understand data so that they can use it to inform their own decisions.

> "Never before have we had more analytical tools to help us identify programs that work so that we can prioritize our investments; data needs to be driving the decisions we make."
>
> **– COLORADO SUCCEEDS MEMBER**

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM MAY CONSIDER:

- Supporting ongoing efforts for a statewide longitudinal data system and data sharing agreements across stakeholders to create greater access to data.
- Helping make data on enrollment, completion, retention, wage outcomes, costs, and other factors more available for students and using it to inform decisions.
- Utilizing more primary data directly from employers about specific jobs drives the most critical work for companies, identifying the credentials/training required for these jobs, and communicating demand for different career pathways.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH & RESOURCES

- The Partnership Imperative
- America's Hidden Economic Engines
- Building Equitable Pathways Through Employer Talent Collaboratives

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