

## POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION & WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

### WHY THIS MATTERS FOR COLORADO

Colorado's economy depends on a workforce that can learn, adapt, and keep pace with rapidly changing industry needs. Yet our postsecondary system still operates on structures, funding models, and reporting requirements that were built for a different era. Today's learners need flexible, affordable pathways that support upskilling and reskilling throughout life. Employers need training programs aligned to real labor market demand. And taxpayers need confidence that public dollars are being invested in programs that deliver results.

Modernizing postsecondary education is essential for Colorado to remain competitive. Half of middle-skill jobs require training beyond high school but not a bachelor's degree, yet only a small share of Coloradans hold these credentials. At the same time, AI and automation are reshaping work, eliminating traditional entry-level roles, and increasing the urgency for short-term credentials, apprenticeships, and stackable pathways. With intentional state leadership, Colorado can build a system that prepares learners for economic mobility and meets employers' urgent talent needs.

### BY THE NUMBERS



**49.9%**

of Colorado high school graduates enrolled in a postsecondary institution in the fall after graduation (2023 data)



**27%**

Colorado high school graduates complete a postsecondary credential within six years

**62.9% of CO residents age 25-64**

hold some form of postsecondary credential (certificate, degree, or graduate/professional degree)

**15%** Working-age Coloradans who hold a non-degree credential for middle-skill jobs

**50%** Middle-skill jobs that require education beyond high school but not a bachelor's degree

**90%+** Living-wage jobs in Colorado that require postsecondary education or training

## OPPORTUNITY FOR GUBERNATORIAL LEADERSHIP

- 1 Set a statewide vision for a unified talent system**—aligning postsecondary, workforce, and economic development priorities so Colorado prepares learners for the jobs that fuel our economy.
- 2 Expand access to high quality, stackable, short term credential pathways** that help learners get into the workforce quickly and keep advancing their skills over time.
- 3 Champion a seamless, portable credit ecosystem** where learning, whether earned in classrooms, on the job, or through prior experience, moves with the learner across institutions and employment.
- 4 Make program value transparent** by elevating data on cost, completion, employment, and earnings so students, families, and employers can make informed decisions.
- 5 Elevate business as a full partner** in shaping pathways tied to high demand industries, ensuring credentials, apprenticeships, and training programs reflect real workforce needs.

## THE VISION

### Imagine a Colorado where:

- ▶ Learning is lifelong, modular, and stackable, allowing every Coloradan to build from short term credentials to associate and bachelor's degrees while earning and advancing.
- ▶ Funding follows outcomes, prioritizing programs that deliver completion, strong employment, wage gains, and upward mobility.
- ▶ Every learner navigates a seamless journey, carrying their credit, credentials, and work experience across K-12, higher education, and employment without losing momentum.
- ▶ Training providers use real time labor market data to design programs aligned with the state's most urgent talent needs.
- ▶ Students and adults have access to advising, coaching, and supports that make education accessible, financially and logically.

## WHAT THIS UNLOCKS

- ▶ **Clear, confident decisions for learners**, who can see which programs lead to meaningful jobs, earnings, and advancement.
- ▶ **Stronger and more reliable talent pipelines** for employers, reducing shortages in health care, construction, education, technology, and advanced manufacturing.
- ▶ **Smarter use of public dollars**, with funding directed toward programs that produce strong completion, employment, and wage outcomes.
- ▶ **Smooth, upward mobility** through stackable credentials and transfer friendly policies that let Coloradans build skills over time without starting over.
- ▶ **Shared accountability for results**, with institutions, employers, and state agencies aligned around measurable, equity minded outcomes.

# TWO STATE MODELS TO LEARN FROM

## MISSOURI

The Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development (DHEWD) is the state agency that oversees higher education, promotes workforce development, and provides access to training and employment opportunities. It serves a large number of students through public and private colleges and universities, provides financial aid programs and helps residents find jobs and develop job-related skills. The DHEWD is overseen by the Coordinating Board for Higher Education and works with various partners to build a skilled workforce.

### Key functions

- ▶ Works with employers and institutions to connect people with jobs and training opportunities.
- ▶ Administers state financial aid programs, such as the merit-based Bright Flight scholarship and the Fast Track grant, which helps cover tuition and apprenticeship costs.
- ▶ Provides access to postsecondary education, training opportunities, and credential attainment programs to prepare Missourians for employment.
- ▶ Supports initiatives like the Missouri Workforce Diploma Program, which allows adults to earn a high school diploma online.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

## KENTUCKY

Kentucky has emerged as a national leader in aligning postsecondary education, workforce development, and economic mobility. Through strong industry collaboration, coordinated governance, and a shared accountability structure, the state ensures that education and training systems are tightly linked to real labor market demand. The result: more Kentuckians graduate with the skills, credentials, and experiences needed to thrive, and more employers have access to a reliable talent pipeline.

### Key Elements of the Model

- ▶ Employer-led sector partnerships such as KY FAME (Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education) exemplify Kentucky's approach, where employers co-design training programs with community colleges, combining classroom learning with paid apprenticeships in high-demand sectors.
- ▶ The Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) houses a dedicated Workforce Initiatives Unit that helps institutions tailor programs to state workforce priorities like healthcare, teaching, and advanced manufacturing.
- ▶ The Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) is a cornerstone of regional access, offering flexible, stackable credentials and deep employer relationships that serve both learners and local economies.
- ▶ The Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board targets systemic barriers, like child care and housing, and invests in work-based learning opportunities that ensure students can access and complete pathways.

# HOW COLORADO SUCCEEDS IS LEADING



Colorado Succeeds brings a business-led perspective to aligning postsecondary and workforce strategies across the state. We advance outcomes-based policy that focuses public investment on programs with proven employment and wage gains, ensuring more learners have access to credentials of value and employer-aligned training. Our work supports the development of stackable, career-connected pathways that link high school to postsecondary and workforce opportunities, and we partner with employers and intermediaries to expand earn-and-learn options and work-based learning tied to postsecondary credit.



Through initiatives such as sector-based Communities of Practice, Project SCALE, and the Colorado Talent Academy, we help communities design and scale high-demand training programs informed by employer needs. We also elevate data transparency efforts that give learners, families, employers, and policymakers clearer information about program quality and outcomes. Through these efforts, Colorado Succeeds can assist the next administration in building a postsecondary system that is transparent, aligned, and focused on value, supporting economic mobility for learners and strengthening Colorado's talent pipeline.



## CONTACT

### **Shannon Nicholas**

Senior Vice President,  
Impact

[snicholas@coloradosucceeds.org](mailto:snicholas@coloradosucceeds.org)