



Aligning Workforce and Education Initiatives

Lessons for Funders, Leaders, and Practitioners

AT A GLANCE

Effective design of education and workforce pathways requires strong coordination and collaboration between cross-sector groups. New initiatives and funding opportunities can result in a duplication of efforts within a region, leading to fatigue and confusion for education and workforce groups. Learn about the actions that funders, leaders, and practitioners can take to align and coordinate their regional, statewide, and national efforts to drive innovative pathways design and implementation.

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce 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 routinely reevaluate our efforts as usage evolves. info.jff.org/language-matters

About the Trellis Foundation

Trellis Foundation is a grant-making, public charitable organization focused on improving postsecondary attainment for low-income students and students of color in Texas. Using a highly collaborative approach that prioritizes catalytic investments, the Foundation focuses on changing or informing policy, practice, and systems. www.trellisfoundation.org

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01. Introduction

Across Texas' education and workforce ecosystem, local, regional, and statewide leaders seek to advance economic success by creating and improving career pathways. The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) defines career pathway systems as “a broad approach for serving populations that may experience significant barriers to employment and can substantively alter the way the workforce system delivers its services and its relationship with partner organizations and stakeholders. Career pathway programs offer a clear sequence, or pathway, of education coursework and/or training credentials aligned with employer-validated work readiness standards and competencies.” The success of these efforts requires cross-sector collaboration. Still, the initiatives and convening bodies that drive this work are often designed and funded in ways that lead to duplication of efforts and initiative fatigue. This brief serves as a challenge to ecosystem leaders, funders, and practitioners to reimagine the design of cross-sector work and develop new opportunities to enhance alignment across initiatives—so that ultimately the pathways for learners and workers are easily navigable and lead to success in high-demand careers.

Origins of Regional Ecosystem Alignment

Over 16 months, JFF supported the Trellis Foundation's Regional Upskilling and Reskilling Initiative, whose nine grantees represented communities across Texas. The initiative focused on collaborative efforts to align regional workforce and education systems to better execute strategies to support the upskilling and reskilling of working learners necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The grantees were community colleges, a workforce board, direct-service community-based organizations (CBOs), and local intermediaries.

Texas has robust initiatives to drive economic advancement by designing career pathways and innovative approaches that serve learners, workers, and industry. Early in its initiative, the Trellis Foundation completed a [brief scan](#) of education and workforce initiatives in Texas aimed at helping grantees more easily connect with initiatives in their region and identify opportunities to align strategies. Over the course of the project, the grantees made progress toward aligning their own upskilling and reskilling initiatives to local and regional efforts by learning about other initiatives' goals and strategies, developing new working relationships, and connecting their own assets and insights to other initiatives' priorities.

Based on lessons learned by the grantee learning community and our engagement with other Texas-based initiatives over the course of the project, we've developed a set of recommendations for how state and national actors can work together to align initiatives and collaborate effectively to drive pathway design and implementation.



02.

The Collaboration Imperative

Because learners and workers interact with multiple institutions, organizations, and employers as they follow the path from education to employment, these stakeholders must closely collaborate in designing pathway systems. Cross-sector teams can convene to reach agreement on strategy and goals, make decisions, execute activities, and gather and review data. This work can be executed through single or multiple leadership groups, action teams, advisory councils, or task forces—each with slightly different priorities and structure.

Many cross-sector groups work on pathway strategies, within most local areas, regions, and states. While they may be complementary, they often overlap in membership, objectives, and populations served. Different entities also view the work through different lenses and with different priorities. As new needs emerge for individuals and industries, it's natural to want to create a new initiative to address them rather than build on what exists. But launching new initiatives without close coordination with existing work can result in duplication, initiative fatigue, and competition for resources.

Causes of Duplication and Misalignment

Initiatives can compete with or complement one another. The critical difference is the intentions of their leaders and funders. While competing or unaligned initiatives may arise due to state or regional politics or other factors, they are often created when funders launch a new initiative or funding opportunity without assessing the current landscape.

Funders may explicitly require that a new cross-sector team be convened as part of their new initiative or funding opportunity, led by a particular type of organization or institution. One example would be a postsecondary-focused initiative that requires that a college lead the pathways work even though a local intermediary may be better positioned to do that. Another would be a sector-specific initiative that starts from scratch to gather employers rather than

leveraging existing convening structures. In other instances, a grant initiative may have atypical deliverables, data collection and reporting requirements, and program elements that make integrating with existing local or regional work tricky. Awareness of existing initiatives in a region may also be lacking, and communications about priorities and progress may not be shared between initiatives regularly. This also leads to duplication.

Launching and managing new initiatives and associated teams stretches the capacity of organizations and institutions. This can also lead to burnout in community partners—particularly, employers and employer associations—which often find themselves as the representative voice at multiple collaboration meetings. In pathways work, the urgency to execute strategies can leave initiatives without enough time for planning and relationship building. Building trust among all the individuals and partners within an initiative takes a great deal of time. Effective collaboration within a team or between initiative teams requires a foundation of trust, with each member feeling that their needs, priorities, and perspectives are valued and acknowledged.



03.

Taking Action

To execute pathway strategies effectively, leaders and funders should examine what work is already underway and where additional funding would have the most impact. For example, how can funding help organizations scale what is already working well? Can funding support evaluation of current efforts? Can funds incentivize new partners to join the existing efforts?

Stakeholder groups can take various short- and long-term actions to support the alignment of initiatives. The recommendations for funders, leaders, and practitioners are intended to be complementary. Existing relationship dynamics between actors, institutional and systems policies, and local or regional politics will factor into the execution of these strategies.

Funders

These recommendations are targeted for all funders investing in pathways within Texas and across the United States. This includes city, county, state, and federal government agencies, foundations, and corporations.

- **Research existing initiatives to identify opportunities to integrate.** Before launching a new initiative, assess all existing cross-sector partnerships that are doing work related to the goals and priorities of your agency or entity. Connect with peers from other agencies, associations, and collaboratives to build an understanding of the landscape. Talk directly to leaders and practitioners in the field to understand the work underway, the community's needs, and gaps in meeting current labor market demand. Funders should also continuously bring awareness to new and existing initiatives they support to promote opportunities for engagement.
- **Engage with peer funders and leaders regularly.** Take time to meet with funders and leaders of other initiatives to identify areas of alignment and overlap between initiatives and to reflect on any lessons learned. Invite peer funders to attend overlapping topical and geographic initiative meetings or convenings. For state and national funders, check in with local or more proximate funders prior to creating an RFP or launching a new initiative. For regional or state funders, maintain regular connections with national funders to identify opportunities for alignment.

- **Trust communities to define needs and approaches for integrating new pathway strategies.** Request proposals from organizations or institutions that are leading initiatives aligned with your priorities and identify high-potential organizations or institutions that can do the work but have not received adequate funding. Learn about the needs of those organizations' local or regional ecosystems and ask them how they would align their existing work to a new investment opportunity. Trust their knowledge of community needs and allow them to define the regions they will serve. Also allow them to choose the partners who will be at the table with them, executing the work based on local priorities and context.
- **Invest in efforts aligned with quality pathway systems.** Fund existing initiatives or create new ones only if they include evidence-based best practices for pathway design. This may include backwards mapping of pathways from regional labor market needs and demand, inclusion of multiple on- and off-ramps, and integration of career navigation systems and supports, to name a few.
- **Make multiyear investments.** Design funding opportunities that span two or more years to allow time for planning and design, execution, and outcome realization. Partners engaged in cross-sector pathways work operate in different ecosystems with different work "seasons." For example, a one-year grant would be challenging for colleges and K-12 schools because of the need to account for planning time and programmatic cycles. Multiyear investments

also allow enough time to build and deepen trust and relationships as part of community-building work.

- **Provide flexible funding.** Balance where grant dollars can be spent between operational costs for partnership building, planning, and streamlining and for the elements of pathway implementation, particularly those that are more challenging to fund through more restrictive government funding streams.
- **Provide options and flexibility for setting and revising goals and collecting data.** Each prospective grantee has its own strengths, existing work, limitations, and community context, so allow them to propose their own goals that address pathway gaps in their local area. If some structure is needed based on the goals of the funding opportunity, provide a menu of options. For example, when the Trellis Foundation invested in the Upskilling and Reskilling Initiative grantees, those organizations could select from among goals that that were best suited to them, whether they were an emerging or more established collaborative, or to propose their own goals. This enabled grantees to set realistic goals and identify the data-collection methods already in use or readily available to ease reporting throughout the grant cycle. If a funder seeks to collect aligned data points from a set of grantees, identify the types of data they already collect and have access to, or ensure they have access to shared data systems (e.g., wage data or college enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse).

- **Maintain consistent, mutually agreed-upon expectations.** When setting up grant requirements, create clear and consistent guidelines throughout the grant period, including reporting, data collection, outcome targets, and other conditions. Shifting expectations throughout a grant period without input from and agreement with grantees causes fatigue and frustration for those organizations. If changes need to be made due to the realities of project execution—whether on the end of the grantee or the funder—new expectations should be mutually agreed upon. In grant reports, add space for grantees to ask to connect with the funder to further discuss needs, successes, and areas for improvement. Making it an invitation can help break down artificial barriers between funders and grantees.
- **Create new connections for grantees.** Consistently look for opportunities to make connections, bring new insights, and offer expertise to grantees. Take time to facilitate introductions between existing contacts and grantees that could aid in the initiative’s success. Share lessons and connections from other peer grantees, or create learning opportunities among grantees to share expertise, problem solve, and co-create solutions together.

- **Be willing to sunset initiatives.** As initiatives reach their goals, be comfortable recognizing that the work is complete and the initiative has run its course. Consider reducing or discontinuing an effort if it no longer aligns with labor market demand or other evidenced community needs.

Regional and Local Pathway Leaders and Practitioners

- **Align with regional priorities.** Braiding initiatives will be most effective if a cross-sector leadership team in each region develops a shared vision and goals for pathway strategies in the region; this will provide a valuable framework for aligning initiatives in a way that is responsive to each region’s specific context and goals. An emerging example is the new designation process in Texas led by the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative to identify regional conveners for each workforce development area to create a regional pathways strategy. Additionally, determine which groups are already meeting to discuss the region’s P-16 initiatives or economic development. Through this process, compare goals, activities, and partners involved.



- **Align with existing statewide priorities.** Research priorities for government agencies, economic development groups, and industry associations and assess recently passed legislation. For example, Talent Strong Texas is a robust statewide plan to increase the attainment of postsecondary credentials of value for all working-age Texans. Leaders might consider how to best partner with community colleges that have received Talent Strong Texas Pathways program funding to support their pathways redesign for adult learners.
- **Build strategies around common frameworks and definitions.** Ensure that regional or local partners operate under common definitions and frameworks for the work being executed (e.g., work-based learning). If there is a state agency–supported definition, align strategies to that definition. If there are no common definitions, do the work locally to ensure alignment on definitions.

Practice from the Field: Aligning Regional Initiatives to State Priorities

As a convener of education and workforce partners across the Coastal Bend region, including the region’s P-16 council, Education to Employment Partners (E2E) prioritized alignment with the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative and Talent Strong Texas. E2E aligned its organizational strategy, including theories of change, with statewide goals and pursues funding opportunities that further this plan.



- **Bring multiple voices together.** Diversity has immense value, so bring multiple partners with different focuses to the table. Leaders should proactively and consistently include the voices and input from the communities the initiative intends to impact, including students and workers. As the work is underway within an initiative, it is essential to consider whose voices are not being heard and how their perspective and expertise can be incorporated.
- **Communicate existing efforts broadly.** Increase the visibility of regional efforts by elevating the activities of existing initiatives within your region. Keep other organizations and institutions in the ecosystem up to date. This can spur opportunities to share resources and insights and help bring new partners to the table. Spearheading a planning process to combine the initiatives where there is close alignment.
- **Commit to ongoing learning.** Integrate regular pulse checks and quality-improvement processes to identify what is working, what is not, and new actions to take.

Practice from the Field: Leveraging Existing Groups

As a direct-service CBO, Foundation Communities has deep insights into its clients' needs and their journeys through pathways. Foundation Communities designed a communications strategy specifically for engagement with regional education and workforce partners. As part of this plan, it has leveraged existing convening spaces to share client voices and insights without creating a new "table" for partners.

Practice from the Field: Reorganizing Multiple Initiatives

Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas led more than eight advisory groups, employer associations, and action teams to drive education and workforce initiatives and grants. Convening each group separately became onerous for both the workforce board staff and members of each group, many of whom participated in several of the groups. To execute and streamline work based on organizational and regional priorities, instead of focusing on each funded initiative, a cross-functional leadership team from Workforce Solutions set a new vision and mission for how it wanted to lead pathways work going forward. The team then named a set of strategic priorities and aligned goals for executing pathway design and execution as a regional intermediary.

To learn more about Workforce Solutions' process, read our accompanying case study "Strategies for Aligning Education and Workforce Initiatives: Lessons from a Workforce Board."

04.

Aligning the Work Ahead

Well-coordinated cross-sector initiatives grounded in quality pathway design principles and reflective of regional labor market needs have the potential to accelerate economic growth for both learners and industry. Investments of time, relationship building, and resources are vital levers to unlock a coordinated pathways ecosystem. To get started, explore your region's existing education and workforce initiatives and identify how you can support their vision and strategy ahead.





Building a Future
That Works
For Everyone