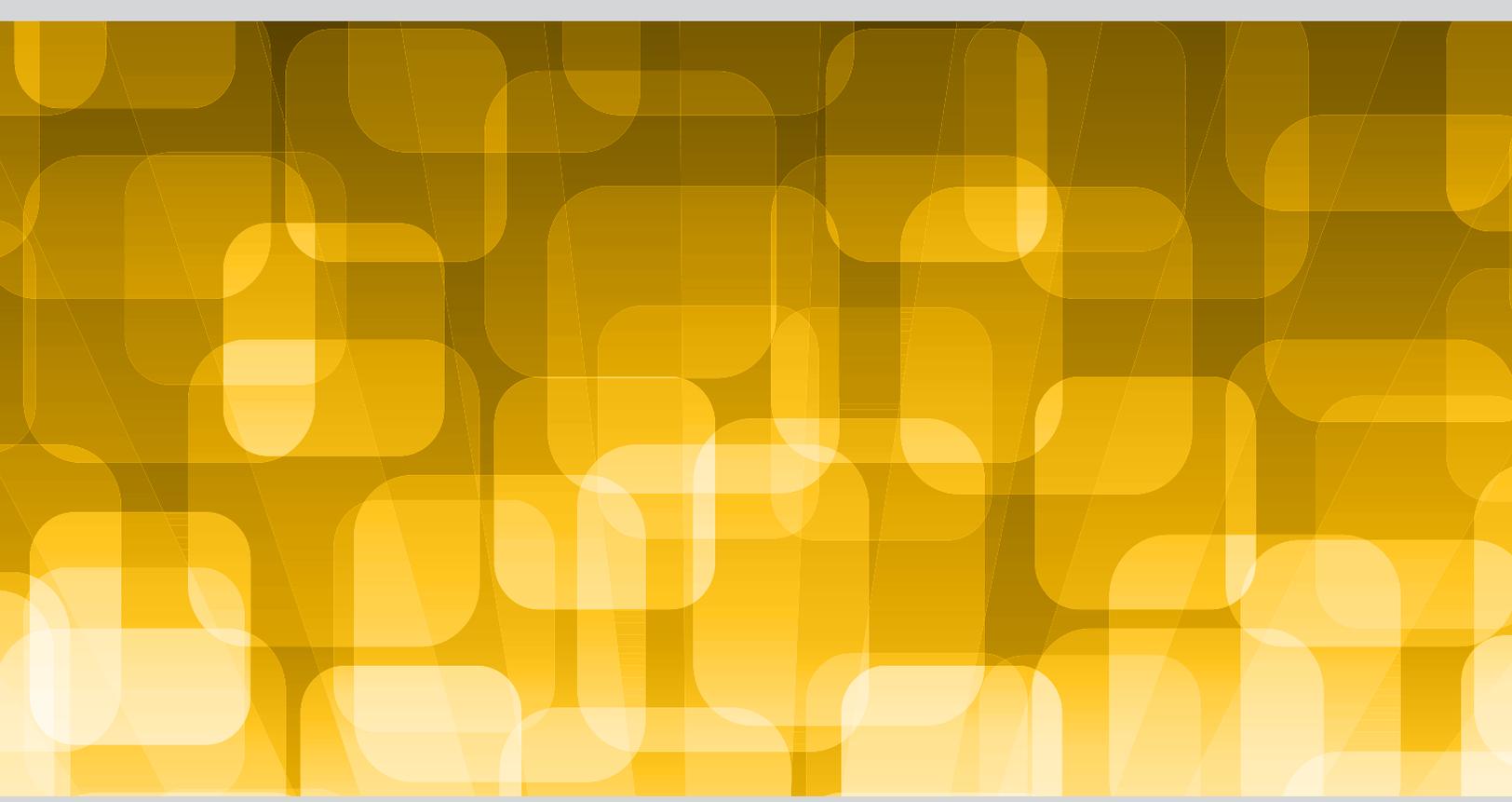


WICHE INSIGHTS

Completion Strategies in the West

Workforce Alignment

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Strategies to Support Alignment and Increase Completion

One of the key findings from the landscape analysis of completion strategies across the West was a shift from broad attainment strategies to a specific focus on completion of credentials of value. A decade ago, nearly every state in the nation had a numeric, postsecondary attainment goal such as “60% of adults will have an associate’s or higher degree.”¹ These types of goals drove state higher education policies aimed at increasing the number of postsecondary degrees and credentials awarded and were fundamental to the states’ higher education agenda. A central finding of the landscape analysis was that states in the West appear to have shifted the framing of priorities from attainment goals to a focus on **providing learning opportunities, including for-credit and noncredit pathways, that align with state workforce and economic development goals.**

Within the broader goal of aligning education and workforce development to support student success, states identified key areas of value and return on investment. A major part of this return on investment is ensuring that students can earn a degree or credential that aligns with their state’s workforce and economic needs. Nearly all plans emphasize workforce alignment or workforce development as a primary focus or priority for postsecondary education in Western states. The strategies identified for workforce alignment aim to help students acquire career-ready knowledge and skills through targeted work-based learning, earn short-term and/or stackable credentials, and access workforce-relevant programs that address state needs and priorities.





Investments in Workforce Alignment

Across the region, states have made considerable investments in statewide initiatives and programs to align postsecondary education and workforce development. The approaches of states vary, but in most cases, these statewide efforts provide targeted investment in academic programming and workforce training intended to support state workforce needs in the short- and long-term.

- ▶ In 2023, the North Dakota Legislative Assembly created the [North Dakota Workforce Education Innovation Fund \(WEIF\)](#) to direct state funds toward academic programs that support and align with the growth of the state's industry needs.² Funds were awarded in 2025 for healthcare, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, mechatronics engineering, construction management, fire science, and aviation maintenance technology.³
- ▶ [Future Ready Oregon](#) is a \$200 million investment in education and workforce training programs aimed at developing talent across Oregon, administered by the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). The initiative focuses on key industry sectors, including healthcare, manufacturing, and technology, with established industry consortia supporting the development and implementation of this work.⁴

About the Landscape Analysis

As states across the region explore how to enhance the value proposition of higher education, it has become clear that credential completion is a critical component of delivering a valuable postsecondary experience. This *WICHE Insights* is part of a series of policy briefs that highlight various postsecondary completion strategies across the WICHE region. These briefs present findings from a landscape analysis of completion approaches in the West, which involved reviewing strategic plans and conducting focus groups with stakeholders across the region. The briefs include selected examples that demonstrate the variation in state approaches to implementing these strategies.

WICHE has developed a [web resource](#) that features further details on the findings of this analysis, including briefs on the region's four overarching approaches to improving completion outcomes, and an interactive online resource displaying state-level strategies. This work was generously funded by ECMC Foundation.



Visit wiche.edu/completion for more information.

- ▶ [Talent Ready Utah](#) is a central network of strategies aimed at enhancing efforts by education and industry partners to create a highly skilled workforce for the state, while offering students more career-aligned education opportunities. Talent Ready Utah has invested nearly \$100 million in innovative education and industry collaborations that support the state’s workforce in key sectors, including healthcare, behavioral health, and computer science. This investment is a vital part of how the Utah System of Higher Education operationalizes the economic development goals as outlined in the state’s strategic plan.⁵
- ▶ The [Wyoming Innovation Partnership \(WIP\)](#) was established in 2021 as a collaborative effort among postsecondary and K-12 education, workforce services, and industry with a purpose to develop innovative programs that better align education with Wyoming’s workforce needs.⁶ To date, the state has invested over \$70 million through WIP in new academic programs, workforce trainings, and equipment to equip the state’s community colleges and university with the infrastructure and programs needed to support economic diversification and meet workforce demands in healthcare, agriculture, and technology.

These statewide efforts create a framework for states to strategically develop and implement policies and practices that support workforce development and align with higher education. For example, investments in colleges through the Wyoming Innovation Partnership have led to the creation of new academic programs that address emerging industry needs in the energy, agriculture, and technology sectors. Additionally, part of Future Ready Oregon’s work includes investments in community colleges to develop new short-term certificate programs in priority areas such as healthcare, manufacturing, and technology.



Short-term Credentials

In recent years, there has been an increase in policies and practices related to short-term or stackable credentials. Although this has become an important topic in postsecondary education policy, WICHE found that strategic plans provided few details about short-term credentials. However, stackable credentials figured heavily in discussions with stakeholder focus groups across the region. These discussions revealed several different approaches to the development and offering of short-term credentials, as well as how states provide financial assistance to help students access and complete these offerings.



APPROACHES TO EXPAND SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS

- ▶ The University of Hawai’i System created a workforce development initiative focused on establishing Industry Recognized Credentials (IRC) and Industry-Value Credentials (IVC) pathways across the system. As part of this effort, the system formed an [Industry-Recognized Credentials Committee \(IRCC\)](#) that will biannually review new applications for

IRC or IVC pathways. The system also developed an evaluation framework and established criteria to guide the development of IRC and IVC pathways.⁷

- ▶ [AccelerateMT](#) is a statewide workforce and economic development nonprofit that partners with Montana higher education and state government to develop and promote short-term training programs aimed at building a more skilled workforce in the state.⁸
- ▶ Led by Washington’s Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, [Career Bridge](#) is a comprehensive resource for career and education planning. Career Bridge offers relevant information on job opportunities and educational training, including nondegree credentials offerings.⁹

There is significant variation among states in the marketing and development of short-term credentials to students and employers, with some higher education institutions and systems becoming more involved in recent years. With the upcoming implementation of Workforce Pell and the central role of states in approving programs, there is a growing need for coordinated state-level partnerships to streamline implementation for students.¹⁰

Focus group participants also identified challenges in defining and measuring short-term credentials and student outcomes for those who engage in these offerings. Gaps in data collection are a significant challenge to states’ ability to understand student access and success in these programs, as well as the outcomes for students who obtain these credentials. As states work to align short-term credentials with for-credit degree programs, it is important to use data and evidence to determine whether and how students can stack credential programs to achieve positive completion outcomes.

ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

In many states, efforts to invest in and develop short-term credentials are part of statewide initiatives to create academic pathways. These pathways connect education and career opportunities and provide a way for students to obtain stacking credentials.

- ▶ In the 2022 legislative session, the Colorado General Assembly passed Senate Bill 22-192, directing the Colorado Department of Higher Education to work with other state agencies and industry partners to align credentials and careers.¹¹ The initial phase of this work led to the development of [stackable credential pathways](#) in behavioral health, cybersecurity, education, healthcare, and software development.¹² Colorado defines a stackable credential pathway as “a sequence of credentials earned through various means, including through assessment of prior learning, that may be accumulated over time and move an individual along a career pathway or up a career ladder.”¹³
- ▶ In 2024, the South Dakota Board of Regents launched the [Gateway Certificate Program](#), which allows high school students enrolled in dual credit to earn foundational certificates in education, agriculture, business, and engineering. These Gateway Certificates are

intended to be stackable within associate and bachelor's degree programs across the state.¹⁴

FINANCIAL AID FOR SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS

As states have sought to expand opportunities for short-term credentials, they have also invested in offsetting the costs of these credentials for students.

- ▶ Created in 2023, the [Idaho LAUNCH](#) program is designed to cover up to 80% of tuition and fees up to \$8,000 for Idaho students to enroll in programs leading to high-demand jobs. The funds can be used at both public and private providers and for noncredit, nondegree offerings.¹⁵
- ▶ In 2024, the New Mexico legislature appropriated \$60 million from the state's Government Results and Opportunity fund to pay for the full cost of tuition and fees for workforce training courses that are not eligible for other financial aid and that result in an industry-recognized credential or endorsement.¹⁶

The upcoming implementation of Workforce Pell will change the financial aid landscape for students enrolling in short-term certificate programs. Although the regulations implementing Workforce Pell are not expected to be finalized until Spring 2026, expanding Pell eligibility to students enrolled in programs lasting eight to no more than 15 weeks (150 to 600 clock hours) could impact existing state funding for students participating in these short-term programs.¹⁷



Work-based Learning

One of the most common tactics in strategic plans to operationalize workforce development and alignment goals was experiential, or work-based learning. States outlined a variety of approaches to this strategy, such as the expansion of internships and apprenticeships and involving industry partners to better support these learning opportunities.

- ▶ A key focus area of the [American Samoa Community College \(ASCC\) strategic plan](#) is supporting successful entry into the workforce. One of the goals in this focus area is to increase student enrollment in apprenticeship programs by 5% annually.¹⁸ The college offers a range of apprenticeship programs for automotive technicians, electricians, and welders, among others, in the trades and technician fields.¹⁹ The ASCC strategic plan also identifies a priority to develop a survey of industry partners to assess workforce skills and improve offerings to better align with workforce needs.
- ▶ The University of California's [UC 2030](#) plan includes a strategy to significantly expand experiential learning across its campuses, encompassing undergraduate research, service learning, and internships, with each campus developing opportunities tailored to its specific context.²⁰

- ▶ The California Community Colleges have several initiatives to develop and expand apprenticeships. The [California Apprenticeship Initiative](#) uses Proposition 98 funds to create new and innovative apprenticeship opportunities throughout the system.²¹ Additionally, the system leverages funds from [California's Division of Apprenticeship Standards \(DAS\) Apprenticeship Innovation Fund](#) to support apprenticeships in sectors beyond traditional trades to include areas like healthcare, advanced manufacturing, technology, and education.²² In 2023, the California Community Colleges launched the [Apprenticeship Pathways Demonstration Project](#), collaborating with 25 community colleges to establish pathways for converting apprenticeships into credit-bearing opportunities. This effort includes the integration of credit for prior learning (CPL) into programs to award credit for apprenticeship, classroom instruction, and on-the-job training.²³
- ▶ The Colorado Department of Higher Education established a new [Career Connected Campus](#) designation to recognize campuses that engage in practices that prepare students for employment. A fundamental part of the designation framework is the recognition of career-connected academic experiences.²⁴ Examples of this include the integration of registered apprenticeships, which offer students the opportunity to earn industry-recognized credentials within their programs, and the addition of work-based learning into the curriculum. The department also uses the Colorado Workforce Development Council's [Work-based Learning Continuum](#) to recognize institutions that integrate work-based learning into their academic programs.²⁵
- ▶ The Utah System of Higher Education strategic plan includes work-based learning within its priority to maximize the value of postsecondary education. This approach highlights how work-based learning opportunities enable students to “earn and learn” through these strategies. Specifically, within the system’s Talent Ready Utah initiative, the [Talent Ready Apprenticeship Connection \(TRAC\)](#) program provides youth apprenticeships across the state. The TRAC program offers paid work experience for students as early as high school and collaborates with both K-12 and postsecondary institutions.²⁶

Work-based learning has long been recognized as a “high impact” practice that promotes student success, but it remains a less-researched topic at the state level.²⁷ There are also gaps across state data systems for tracking and measuring student engagement with experiential learning. However, some states do measure student engagement in work-based learning in their data and reporting or are prioritizing this measurement.

- ▶ One of the pillars of the [Nevada System of Higher Education's strategic plan](#) is focused on meeting workforce needs in Nevada. Among the strategies discussed in the plan is the development of the data infrastructure required to track student participation in internships and work-based learning.²⁸ These data will help system leaders better understand how this engagement supports student outcomes, informing future decisions.

- ▶ Every expected outcome of the North Dakota University System strategic plan is measured and reported on the state’s public [strategic plan dashboard](#), including the number of students in internship and apprenticeship programs.²⁹ In order to meaningfully track this engagement, the system has also established a common definition for “internship” and “apprenticeship” that is used across the state’s institutions.

It appears that there is more work to be done in how states define and measure work-based learning experiences for students. This aligns with the discussion among focus group participants, which articulated the difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of specific strategies implemented across the state. These difficulties are discussed further in the [collaboration, coordination, and structures brief](#).



Conclusion

The alignment of education and workforce development is a fundamental part of the mission and role of postsecondary education, and the landscape analysis revealed that states have prioritized these efforts in recent years. As states face a changing economy driven by technological disruptions and advances in AI, along with a declining youth population, it is more important than ever for higher education institutions to collaborate with state agencies and organizations to create a career-connected, education-to-workforce system for students. Many examples in this brief highlight themes of partnership and collaboration beyond higher education. For instance, states are building systems and structures to better coordinate workforce services and postsecondary education at the state level, helping to guide institution-level learning opportunities that effectively support students transitioning from education to the workforce.

ENDNOTES

- 1 WICHE is a regional interstate compact that includes 15 states and the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States. The use of the term state reflects all states, territories, and freely associated states in the WICHE region. The WICHE region includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the following U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States: American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. Throughout this brief, the term “state” is understood to include states, territories, and freely associated states.
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