

# REALIZING INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY IN WIOA

A Playbook  
for Creating  
Effective  
State Plans

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NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the next several months, states will embark on the process of creating new state plans required by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This report provides recommendations on how states can use their WIOA state plan to establish strategies that close the skill gap and help workers and businesses succeed.

The writing of a new state workforce development plan is a major opportunity for states. WIOA emphasizes sector partnerships, career pathways, cross-program data and measurement, and job-driven investments. It is written in a way that allows visionary leaders to use it as a lever for strategies that support economic growth and help a wide range of workers succeed in the labor market. The state plan need not be limited to federal programs under WIOA's four titles or to minimum federal planning requirements. Instead, states are free to use their plans to describe the workforce development system they truly want, and to explain how they will use WIOA and other state and federal programs to achieve that vision. Rather than being a compliance document that sits on a shelf, the state plan should serve as a playbook for effective strategies that help workers and businesses succeed. Broad and authentic stakeholder engagement during the planning process will help ensure that the plan is supported both by those who will implement it and by those intended to benefit from it.

National Skills Coalition offers the following recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, advocates, employers, and labor to consider as they work to create a state plan that takes full advantage of the skills strategies promoted by WIOA:

- **The Planning Process:** The state planning process should use different techniques to provide multiple opportunities for a broad set of stakeholders to offer input on the state plan. In determining whether to be an early implementer, states should consider how to balance the early implementation timeline with the process necessary to create a strong plan with broad stakeholder support.
- **Plan Structure and Format:** The state plan should clearly describe the state's vision and goals for preparing a skilled workforce that meets employer needs. It should articulate the major strategies the state will use to achieve its vision and should explain the "who, what, and when" of action steps to implement those strategies.
- **Sector Partnerships:** The state plan should describe the state's criteria for local or regional sector partnerships, and it should explain how the state will provide support and funding to those partnerships.
- **Career Pathways:** The state plan should describe how state programs will collaborate with each other, local programs, and other stakeholders to create career pathways. They should also describe how states will use effective adult education approaches, wrap-around support services, and sector partnerships as part of their career pathway approach.
- **Cross-Agency Data and Measurement:** The state plan should describe a comprehensive cross-agency data and performance measurement system that covers all major workforce development programs. This includes how the state will use supply-demand reports, dashboards, and cross-agency credential measurement to develop policies to close the skill gap; how it will link data to measure outcomes; and how it will provide training program performance scorecards for students and workers.

## INTRODUCTION

On July 22, 2014 President Obama signed WIOA into law, replacing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Most provisions of WIOA become effective on July 1, 2015.

WIOA includes many substantial changes to WIA that should improve the nation's workforce development system. WIOA should help states and local areas better align workforce programs with each other and with the needs of employers for a skilled workforce.

WIOA's support for sector **partnerships** should spur the growth of this proven industry-driven strategy for advancing workers and addressing employer skill needs. WIOA's encouragement of career pathways should increase the integration of basic education, skills training, and support services, helping more individuals attain postsecondary credentials and higher earnings. The creation of common metrics that can reliably measure key outcomes from a large number of programs should help unify workforce programs as a coherent system. And WIOA's emphasis on job-driven investments that directly connect training to employment should provide more people with jobs.

One of the first actions states will take under WIOA is the creation of a state plan. States do not have to submit a plan until March 1, 2016. However, it will take months for a state to fully engage stakeholders in a thorough process to create a plan that takes full advantage of the strategies promoted by WIOA. Moreover, many states are considering the option of early implementation. While the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has not yet issued an early implementation timeline, states may be able to submit their plan as early as March 2015 and implement WIOA beginning July 1, 2015.

This report offers National Skill Coalition's recommendations on how states can use the WIOA state plan to establish a vision of a workforce system that closes the skill gap and helps workers and businesses succeed. A model plan will encompass all key programs, both federal and state-funded, and will be supported both by stakeholders who will carry out the plan and by customers of the system. In addition to the process and structure of the state plan, this report's recommendations focus on critical content for four key strategies that are supported by WIOA: sector partnerships, career pathways, cross-program data and measurement, and job-driven investments. The recommendations also include examples from current state plans.<sup>1</sup>

The recommendations are intended for all those who will be involved in the creation of their state plan. This includes, or should include, not only the individuals in governors' offices and state workforce boards who are tasked with the plan's development, but also representatives of business, labor, local workforce boards, adult education, the employment service, vocational rehabilitation, secondary and postsecondary education, training providers, community-based organizations, and others who advocate for increasing the skills of individuals and meeting the skill needs of employers.

<sup>1</sup> Links to state plans referenced in the report can be accessed in the online version of the document available on National Skill Coalition's website.

## I. THE PLANNING PROCESS

WIOA charges the state workforce development board with assisting the governor in developing the state plan. In addition to the governor, the membership of the state board must include representatives of business, labor, the legislature, local elected officials, and the state agencies that administer Adult, Youth and Dislocated Worker services (WIOA Title I), Adult Education (WIOA Title II), Wagner-Peyser (WIOA Title III), and Vocational Rehabilitation (WIOA Title IV). The board may include representatives of community-based organizations, organizations addressing the needs of youth, and other members designated by the governor. While states must implement WIOA by July 1, 2016, the law allows states to be “early implementers.”

In its effort to assist the governor in developing the state plan, the workforce development board should use different techniques to provide multiple opportunities for stakeholders beyond its membership to provide input on the state plan. In determining whether to be an early implementer, states should consider how to balance the early implementation timeline with the process required to create a strong plan with broad stakeholder support.

### STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

State workforce development boards should use a variety of techniques to solicit input on the state plan from a broad set of stakeholders. In the past development of workforce plans, states have used a variety of methods to reach out to a broader set of organizations and individuals concerned about workforce development. Techniques have included field hearings and forums, surveys, focus groups, social media, workgroups, and other methods. States have reached out to local workforce boards and staff, secondary educators, community and technical colleges, proprietary schools, economic development officials, social service agencies, and many community-based employment, training, and social service providers.

For example, to develop [WORKSmart Kentucky](#), the Kentucky State Workforce Investment Board established four planning committees that, among other things, engaged in site visits, customer focus groups, and conversations with technical staff. The state convened meetings with five stakeholder groups, including local workforce boards, community and technical colleges, economic development professionals, and other stakeholders. State workforce board staff members held monthly discussions with local board directors and interviewed individually the state directors of programs covered under WIA.

To create [Washington’s state plan](#), the state workforce board established two workgroups consisting of business and labor representatives, state and local agency officials, and practitioners from the employment and training, education, and economic development fields. Once a draft plan was put together, the state board held public forums in four cities around the state, with participation from 120 individuals. The board gathered advice from business representatives at Rotary and Chamber of Commerce meetings in five cities. In addition, the state board posted drafts of the plan on its website and solicited comments by e-mail. The planning process took a total of seven months.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state workforce development board and state and local stakeholders should engage in an extensive planning process that makes possible broad and authentic stakeholder engagement. Stakeholders include state agencies that implement each of the programs included in the state plan; advocacy organizations for the programs’ customers, including business, labor, and community-based organizations; local workforce development boards and staff; and local providers for each program included in the plan. The engagement process should include a variety of opportunities for stakeholders to offer input and to comment on drafts, including multiple locations and methods of communication.

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## EARLY IMPLEMENTATION

WIOA requires that states have the opportunity to implement the Act prior to July 1, 2016. DOL will issue guidance for early implementation. The dates for early implementation are not known at this time; however, the most likely dates are March 1, 2015 for plan submission and July 1, 2015 for plan implementation. When WIA was implemented, DOL allowed states to submit transition plans that identified parts of the new Act that would be implemented early and parts that would not be ready until the regular implementation deadline. It should also be noted that when WIA was implemented, states that were early implementers became eligible to respond to DOL opportunities not available to other states, such as opportunities to provide input on the final regulations. The early implementer states for WIA were Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, and Vermont. In determining whether to be early implementers, states should consider whether the early implementation timeline is sufficient for engaging in an extensive planning process that will produce a high-quality workforce plan.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** States need to determine for themselves if they will be ready for early implementation, including having the stakeholder process and state plan that they want completed in time for early plan submission.

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## II. PLAN STRUCTURE AND FORMAT

WIOA identifies the basic structure required for the state plan: it must consist of a strategic plan that is broad in scope and operational elements that are consistent with the strategic plan. The strategic plan must include the state's vision, goals, and strategies for preparing a skilled workforce and closing the skill gap. The operational elements must identify the programmatic steps the state will take to implement the strategies.

The state plan should clearly describe the state's vision and goals for preparing a skilled workforce that meets employer needs. It should articulate the major strategies the state will use to achieve its vision, and explain the "who, what, and when" of action steps to implement those strategies.

### STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL PORTIONS OF THE STATE PLAN UNITED AROUND A COMMON VISION AND GOALS

The plan is an opportunity for the state to commit fully to a vision of a skilled workforce that meets employer needs, and to acknowledge the central role that middle-skill training plays in meeting those needs. Existing state plans for California, Minnesota, Maryland, and Virginia all articulate this type of vision.

[California's plan](#) is presented as a response to the state's skill gap, particularly for middle-skill jobs, and the Governor's Workforce Development Council in Minnesota placed its call for "[All Hands on Deck](#)" clearly in the context of the state's skill gap.

[Maryland's state plan](#) is built around the Governor's goal of increasing the number of Marylanders who receive at least two years of postsecondary education and skills training by 20 percent before 2018; this goal guides the Governor's Skills2Compete initiative and aligns the full array of state human capital programs.

Virginia's state plan clearly establishes four broad goals for the state's workforce development system:

1. Establish Career Pathways as the Primary Model for Collaboration between Workforce Development Stakeholders
2. Expand Virginia's Pipeline of Workers for Targeted Industry Sectors
3. Increase Attainment of Postsecondary Education Credentials
4. Strengthen Data and Reporting of Virginia's Career Pathways and Workforce System

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should clearly describe the state's vision and goals for preparing a skilled workforce and meeting employer needs for middle-skill workers.

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## BROAD SCOPE

States have the choice of either submitting a unified plan that includes the strategic plan and the operational elements for WIOA's four titles or submitting a **combined plan** that also includes operational components required by federal agencies for other programs, such as Career and Technical Education (CTE), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

While a combined plan is desirable, there is not yet federal guidance on how to include operational elements for programs other than the four titles of WIOA. Without such guidance, states may be reluctant to submit a combined plan.

Still, states submitting a unified plan should use the strategic portion to address all the major strategies the state will implement in order to prepare a skilled workforce, not just those covered by WIOA. Such strategies should include actions by a wide range of agencies and programs. Having everything in one place will help coordinate the efforts of agencies and programs and will facilitate their responsiveness to the common vision of preparing a skilled workforce.

The current state plans for Massachusetts, California, and Texas all include programs beyond those administered through WIA:

- Massachusetts' state plan includes education and economic development programs in addition to workforce programs and requires the secretaries of the relevant departments to align their efforts.
- California state law "requires the State [Workforce] Board to collaborate with the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges, the State Department of Education, other appropriate state agencies, and local workforce investment boards to develop a comprehensive state plan that serves as a framework for public policy, fiscal investment, and operation of all state labor exchange, workforce education, and training programs."
- Texas' state plan covers the activities of eight different agencies and over 20 programs.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** Whether a state chooses to submit a unified or a combined state plan, the plan should broadly cover all the major strategies and actions across agencies and programs that the state will use to prepare a skilled workforce that meets employer needs. National Skills Coalition will provide recommendations on combined state plans as federal expectations regarding combined plans become clearer.

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## ACTIONABLE

As previously stated, the operational portions of the plan must identify the programmatic steps that will be taken in order to implement the state's strategies. So for example, the strategic plan should describe the state's strategy for supporting sector partnerships. The operational portions should indicate specifically how programmatic resources will contribute to that strategy, the action steps that will be taken, and the entities that will be responsible for implementation.

Similarly, local and regional plans must be consistent with the state plan and should indicate how local areas will contribute to strategies in the state plan. The operational portions of the state plan should be specific enough that state policymakers, state administrators, and local officials can tell who is responsible for doing what and how the pieces fit together to complete the state's strategies. Such specificity will provide accountability and help those who are responsible carry out activities in a manner consistent with the state plan.

For example, [WORKSmart Kentucky](#) spells out the specific action steps that will be carried out in order to achieve the state's goals, indicates who is responsible for implementing the action steps, and sets forth a timeline for implementation.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The operational portions of the state plan should clearly describe the “who, what, and when” of action steps that implement the state's strategies.

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## III. SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

WIOA highlights sector partnerships as a key strategy for meeting the needs of employers, workers, and jobseekers. A sector partnership organizes multiple employers and key stakeholders in an industry cluster into a working group that focuses on the shared goals and human resources needs of the industry cluster.

Under WIOA, state plans must describe how employers will be engaged—including through sector partnerships. Local workforce boards must use adult and dislocated worker funds to “develop, convene, or implement” sector partnerships, and state support for local sector partnerships is one of the activities for which statewide set-aside funds can be used.

Accordingly, a state plan should describe the key elements of sector partnerships that the state will support. It should also explain how the state will administer and fund a strategy that supports the development, convening, and implementation of local area sector partnerships.

### STATE CRITERIA FOR SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

Under WIOA, state boards must assist the governor in the implementation and continuous improvement of the workforce development system, including through sector partnerships. The state plan should describe the key elements of sector partnerships the state will support, addressing each of the areas discussed below.

#### Target Sectors

States should prioritize certain industry sectors and/or provide guidance on how local areas can identify key regional sectors. Critical factors include employment opportunities, wage levels, and the economic impact of the industry. For example, [Arizona's state plan](#) describes how local workforce investment areas should use labor market information and employer feedback to identify target sectors. It sets the expectation that local areas will use the Arizona Sector Selection Tool, which assesses sectors based on employment size and concentration, recent and projected growth, worker earnings, and business growth patterns (pp. 29-30).

## Partners

WIOA lists several types of stakeholders that can participate in a sector partnership.<sup>2</sup> States can use this list to provide advice on the types of partners that should participate. States should ensure that partners include multiple employers within the industry and organizations that play a critical role in educating, training, and supporting workers in the sector, including community-based organizations. [Maine's state plan](#), for example, includes a detailed discussion of the roles that businesses, education and training providers, workforce investment agencies, and service providers should play when participating in sector partnerships. (pp. 36-39).

A partnership should include businesses that, taken together, provide a substantial portion of local jobs in the sector. Likewise, a partnership should include multiple training providers to ensure that most of the organizations providing local training in the sector are represented. Broad membership will allow the partnership to serve several functions and will avoid the creation of multiple local partnerships for the same sector. It will also enable the partnership to offer greater service and employment opportunities to employers and individuals. [Michigan's state plan](#) explains how it uses industry clusters<sup>3</sup> as an organizing framework to leverage partners' knowledge and resources, decrease duplication, and achieve training cost-savings (p. 101).

## Intermediaries

A variety of organizations can play the role of convening local sector partnerships, including local workforce boards, community colleges, chambers of commerce, community-based organizations, and economic development boards or agencies. State plans can provide guidance on how intermediaries can be identified at the local level. Because many types of effective conveners already exist, and because the type of entity that is best positioned to be the convener varies from one area to another, we recommend that states permit flexibility as to who serves as the local convener.

For example, [California's state plan](#) describes different organizations that can serve as the convener—local boards, industry associations, labor-management partnerships, regional nonprofits, and community colleges—as long as they have credibility within the industry (pp. 3-5; 5-6). In discussing the state's industry cluster approach, Michigan's state plan explains that local workforce agencies should take advantage of existing partnerships (p. 105).

## Targeted Populations

Sector partnerships can be an effective strategy for serving low-income adults and youth. States that use WIOA Title I funds to support local sector partnerships will be expected to serve eligible populations through sector partnerships. Whether or not Title I funds are used, however, the state plan should be explicit that raising the skill levels and advancing employment of low-income adults and youth is a key purpose of the state's sector partnership strategy.

For example, [Maryland's state plan](#) explains that its state-funded sector strategy (called "EARN") targets Maryland's harder-to-serve, lower-income, or lower-skilled residents by encouraging programs to combine adult education and support services with sector-specific occupational skills training (p. 3). [Rhode Island's state plan](#) identifies helping youth connect to careers as an activity of a successful industry partnership (p. 19).

<sup>2</sup> Under WIOA, key stakeholders include representatives of multiple businesses or other employers in the industry cluster, labor, and provider(s) of education or training programs that support the industry cluster. Partners may also include representatives of state or local government, state or local economic development agencies, state boards or local boards, state workforce agencies or entities providing employment services, other state or local agencies, business or trade associations, economic development organizations, nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations, intermediaries, philanthropic organizations, industry associations, and others.

<sup>3</sup> Michigan uses the term "clusters" not "sectors".

## Activities

States should indicate the types of activities expected from sector partnerships. Activities may include, among others, skill gap analyses, skill standards and certifications, shared training programs, and mechanisms for regular employer engagement. The state, however, should not be overly prescriptive since local sectors have different needs, and partnerships are in different stages of meeting those needs.

For example, [California's state plan](#) lists several activities for sector partnerships, including identifying and articulating skill needs, mapping and establishing career pathways, developing and/or adjusting training curriculum, developing common systems to track participant success, and providing industry-valued skill certifications, credentials, and degrees (pp. 3-6).

Similarly, [Rhode Island's state plan](#) details activities of successful industry partnerships. These include but are not limited to identifying and addressing businesses' aggregate skill needs, helping education and training organizations align curriculum and programs to industry demand, developing career ladders within and across companies, and developing new industry credentials (p. 19).

## Outcomes

A state plan should also describe how it will use WIOA core indicators and other measures to assess sector partnerships. WIOA indicators for workers include employment rates, earnings, and credential attainment. While WIOA's employer measure is still under development, outcomes for businesses can be measured by such metrics as vacancy rates, employee turnover, employer satisfaction, number of employer members in partnerships, employer member retention rates, and employer investments.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe the key elements of sector partnerships that it will support and the outcome measures it will use to assess sector partnerships.

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## STATE ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT LOCAL SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

A state plan should explain the types of support the state will provide to sector partnerships and which state agencies will be responsible for administering that support. States can facilitate the development of local sector partnerships by supporting sector-specific research that identifies skill gaps and the creation of plans to close gaps. States can support implementation by providing resources or technical assistance for partnership convening, worker training, and the establishment of skill standards and industry-based certifications. State plans should assign a lead agency to administer this support, and should describe the roles and responsibilities of any additional state agencies involved in supporting sector partnerships.

For example, [Colorado's state plan](#) describes the support and technical assistance that the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment provides to regional sector partnerships in the form of sector academies, a sector toolkit, and a "Sector Summit" for self-defined regional partnerships to learn how to create and broaden sector partnerships (pp. 40-41).

Likewise, [Kentucky's state plan](#) explains that the state designed a "Sectors Strategy 101" course, held "Sector Strategy Institutes" to introduce the concept of sector partnerships, and developed a sector strategy toolkit (pp. 20-21). It also describes resources the state will continue to provide, including sector-specific skill need assessments, an updated toolkit, professional development and peer-learning, and support developing strategic plans (p. 66).

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should explain the sector partnership planning and implementation activities that it will support and assign a lead agency to administer that support. It should also describe the roles and responsibilities of any additional supporting state agencies.

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## FUNDING

A state plan should also describe the funding source(s) a state will use to support the activities described above. States can use the WIOA Title I statewide set-aside to support the planning, convening, and implementation of sector partnerships. Additionally, states can use state funds—such as general fund appropriations, unemployment insurance diversion funds, or revenue from specified state taxes—to help fund sector partnerships. Philanthropic foundations and local government may also be sources of funding.

States typically allocate funding for sector partnerships to local areas through a competitive grant process. States may require local partnerships to provide a cash or in-kind match in order to increase resources and demonstrate local commitment.

State plans for Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island all describe funding for competitive grants to support sector partnerships:

- [Kentucky's state plan](#) describes Industry Partnership grants that are used to support sector partnerships (p. 87) and sets as an action step making investment decisions based on sector strategies (p. 95).
- [Maryland's state plan](#) describes Maryland's EARN initiative (p. 3), which provides competitive grants to sector partnerships to support planning and collaborative training strategies in sectors where there is a skill gap.
- [Massachusetts' state plan](#) explains how the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund uses state funding to give grants to employer-driven partnerships that design industry-specific education and training programs (p. 26).
- [New Jersey's state plan](#) notes that New Jersey uses state training funds to support new training programs developed in partnership with multiple employers to address industry-specific skill shortages (p. 15; Action 3.8)
- [Rhode Island's state plan](#) explains that the governor's workforce board uses allocations from the state's job development fund to support the key activities of industry partnerships (p. 19)

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe federal and state funding sources that will be used to provide planning and implementation support to local sector partnerships. It should also describe the mechanism for allocating that funding to local areas.

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## IV. CAREER PATHWAYS

WIOA also promotes career pathways as a key workforce development strategy. Career pathways align and integrate education (including ABE and ESL), job training, counseling and support services to create accelerated pathways to postsecondary education credentials and employment in in-demand occupations.

Under WIOA, state and local boards are tasked with developing career pathways. The state plan must describe a strategy for aligning core programs and explain how different entities will support career pathways. WIOA Title I statewide set-aside funds can be used to support career pathway development and implementation, and WIOA Title II state leadership funds must be used to align adult education and literacy activities with other core programs.

Given this framework, state plans should describe how state programs will collaborate with each other, local programs, and other stakeholders to create career pathways as defined by WIOA. They should also describe how states will use effective adult education approaches and wrap-around support services as part of their career pathway approach. Additionally, they should explain how career pathways will relate to sector partnerships.

## CROSS-PROGRAM COLLABORATION

Career pathways involve a range of stakeholders. In addition to state and local workforce boards and agencies, potential partners should include education and training providers, community colleges, community-based organizations, support service providers, and employers. A state plan should explain how state partners will collaborate with each other and with key stakeholders at the state and local levels to create career pathways. A state plan can do this by:

- Articulating a common career pathway strategy;
- Specifying the different roles and responsibilities of key partners in implementation of that strategy;
- Identifying policies, MOUs, and articulation agreements that need to be created or changed to support cross-program collaboration;
- Describing how agency and program funding and resources will contribute to career pathways; and
- Explaining how cross-program data and measurements will be used to facilitate and assess career pathways.

State plans for Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Virginia each describe cross-agency coordination around career pathways:

- **Massachusetts:** The [state plan](#) highlights the Governor's cross-agency effort to develop career pathways in four major industries. The effort is being led by three state secretaries and is advanced by the Workforce Board's Pathways Committee. The state plan articulates the Pathway Committee's goals, fundamental principles, primary roles, and operational functions. It also explains how the Pathways Committee will be supported by an interagency funding team. Finally, it describes how the Committee will use a regional planning process to develop career pathways (pp. 12-15).
- **Minnesota:** The [state plan](#) identifies Minnesota's career pathways initiative, FastTRAC, as a key skill strategy. The state plan sets the goal of expanding FastTRAC programs across the state by building on an existing partnership between state workforce, education, and human service agencies, the Minnesota Workforce Council Association, and the Greater Twin Cities United Way (Section A, p. 4). It also provides a discussion of how these partners work together to blend funding and resources in the implementation of FastTRAC.
- **Virginia:** The [state plan](#) sets out a vision for career pathways to serve as a primary vehicle for collaboration between workforce development stakeholders (pp. 8-9). It lists specific strategies for supporting this vision, including a statewide MOU that defines partner roles and expectations, a governor's Executive Order establishing a career pathways governance structure, expanded and diversified funding sources, and a career pathways and workforce development report card to measure progress (p. 26).

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should explain the roles, policies, and resources that state agencies will adopt or use to collaborate with each other and other state and local stakeholders to create career pathways.

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## EFFECTIVE ADULT EDUCATION APPROACHES IN CAREER PATHWAYS

Key features of career pathways under WIOA include programs that provide basic education/ESL concurrently with or in the context of workforce preparation or occupational skills training, and strategies that accelerate individuals' educational and career advancement.

Examples of such programs include:

- Integrated programs that combine adult basic education with occupational skills training in the same classroom or course
- Bridge programs that prepare adults with limited academic or English skills to enter and succeed in pre-college or credit-bearing postsecondary education and training
- Vocational ESL programs
- Dual enrollment programs, in which adults and out-of-school youth without a high school diploma or its equivalent enroll in postsecondary instruction and receive both postsecondary and secondary credit.

A state plan should describe how these programs will be deployed as part of the state's career pathway approach, contribute to the state's overall career pathway vision and strategy, and be administered and funded. A state plan should also explain how these programs will help individuals of different skill levels prepare for and be successful in earning postsecondary education credentials and employment. Existing state plans for Minnesota, Washington State, and Illinois discuss effective adult education approaches:

- [Minnesota's state plan](#) explains that FastTRAC promotes effective adult education approaches by promoting co-instruction to teach literacy and occupational skills in a career context (Section B, p. 6, Section G, pp. 56-59). According to the state plan, 90 percent of Minnesota's adult basic education service delivery system use bridge or integrated programs with FastTRAC career pathways (Section B, p. 14).
- [Washington's state plan](#) identifies bridge programs and programs like I-BEST as key approaches for improving training for adult workers with barriers to advancement. I-BEST integrates basic or developmental education with job skills training. The plan also calls out the need to increase approaches that accelerate individuals' education and training advancement, such as credit for prior learning, competency-based programs, stackable and portable credentials, and online and hybrid learning programs. (p. 11)
- [Illinois' state plan](#) identifies sector-based bridge programs as a key aspect of their career pathways strategy. The plan notes that the state has implemented bridge programs to ensure that low-skilled adults have access to career pathways in key industries (p. 14).

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe how it will deploy effective adult education approaches as part of the state's career pathways strategy.

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## WRAPAROUND SUPPORT SERVICES, INCLUDING COUNSELING AND FINANCIAL AID

Career pathways are designed to enable low-income, low-skilled adults achieve postsecondary credentials and higher paying employment; accordingly they must offer support services to facilitate individuals' transitions across programs and promote persistence within a pathway. Support services, such as transportation and child care, are critical for reducing barriers that prevent low-income individuals from persisting in career pathways. Quality child care and other family support services help parents who are students, as well as their children. Counseling and career guidance connect individuals to needed services and draw the roadmap to a career based on solid information. A state plan should describe the types of support services that will be available to career pathway participants, as well as the state agencies and programs responsible for providing those services.

Career pathways are increasingly using professional navigators to work closely with participants as they move through career pathways—connecting them with the right support services and providing guidance on transitions from one program to the next. In fact, WIOA includes as an element of career pathways “counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual’s education and career goals.” A state plan could describe how the state will use navigators in its career pathway strategy, in which agency navigators will be located, and how navigator positions will be funded.

For example, [Washington’s state plan](#) mentions the use of navigators and discusses increased partnerships with community-based organizations and the state human services agencies to provide supportive services (p. 11). Likewise, [Minnesota’s state plan](#) explains that the Minnesota Family Investment Program and WIA Title I-B case managers connect FastTRAC participants with support services to increase retention and completion (Section B, p. 6). [Virginia’s state plan](#) describes the state’s Adult Career Coach program, which places coaches at every Virginia community college to help students develop career and education plans and access resources (p. 35).

Career pathway participants often need access to financial aid in order to pursue postsecondary education. However, traditional financial aid is less accessible to students who are working, attending school less than half-time, or enrolled in non-credit occupational courses. Some states have responded to this challenge by providing financial aid for working or part-time students or for students enrolled in certain industry training programs. A state plan should identify the financial aid resources available to career pathway participants, with particular attention paid to resources for working, part-time, or non-credit students.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe the types of support services and financial aid that will be available to career pathway participants.

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## RELATIONSHIP TO SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

Under WIOA, career pathways are to align with the skill needs of industries in the state or region. States can do this by using sector partnerships to help inform the development of career pathways. For instance, sector partnerships can help identify and design industry skill standards, curriculum, and certifications that should be part of career pathways. For activities that are best done on a statewide basis, states may want to create state workgroups that draw upon members of local sector partnerships, or states may want to select particular local sector partnerships to take a lead role for the state. Similarly at the local level, career pathways can use sector partnerships to engage employers on the labor market relevance of local pathway programs. The bottom line is that states and local areas should take advantage of sector partnerships in the development of career pathways, particularly in order to obtain input from industry representatives.

For example, [California’s state plan](#) discusses using sector partnerships to develop industry-specific career pathways (p. 4-2) and [Illinois’ state plan](#) explains how the state’s sector partnerships will help develop and guide career pathways for youth and adults. (pp. 13-16)

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should explain how the state will link career pathways and sector partnerships.

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## V. CROSS-AGENCY DATA AND MEASUREMENT

WIOA has a new focus on data and performance measurement. Specifically, WIOA sets out common metrics that must apply to each of WIOA's four titles and training providers; these common metrics can also be applied to other programs. In addition to employment and earnings measures, the WIOA common metrics include a postsecondary credential attainment measure. WIOA will also provide a template for training program performance reports.

These requirements provide the opportunity for states to use cross-agency data and measurement to better align workforce and education programs with employer skill needs. The state plan should describe a comprehensive cross-agency data and performance measurement system that covers all major workforce development programs. This includes how the state will use supply-demand reports, dashboards, and cross-agency credential measurement to develop policies to close the skill gap; how it will provide training program performance scorecards for students and workers; and how it will link data to measure outcomes.

### COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM

The state plan is an opportunity for states to commit to a comprehensive, unified data and performance measurement system. WIOA asks states to describe how they will assess the overall effectiveness of their workforce investment system, including assessing “the progress of participants that are exiting from core programs in entering, persisting in, and completing postsecondary education, or entering or remaining in employment.” While states are required to describe their performance measurement system for the core programs of WIOA's four titles, states are free to go beyond the core programs and describe how their performance measurement system covers additional programs or even their entire workforce development system.

The Workforce Data Quality Campaign (WDQC) has identified 13 “key features of an aligned, inclusive, and market-relevant state data system.” The 13 elements encompass leading-edge practices in the states. A state plan's discussion of data and measurement should ideally address each of the 13 elements in the WDQC [Blueprint](#), explaining how the state will have each of the 13 elements in place.

Among current state plans, [Washington's](#) is probably the closest to describing a comprehensive cross-agency data and performance measurement system. The plan devotes an entire chapter to describing goals, measures, evaluations, reports, data collection, data linking, performance targets, and performance-based consequences.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe a comprehensive cross-agency data and performance measurement system that covers all major workforce development programs, not just the four titles of WIOA.

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### SUPPLY AND DEMAND REPORTS

Under WIOA, state plans must identify the skill needs in the state; this should include identifying the sectors and occupations of the economy where there is a shortage of skilled workers. States can use supply and demand reports to fulfill this requirement.

Supply and demand reports measure the supply of skilled workers and compare that supply to the number of skilled workers demanded by employers. These reports break down data by occupational fields and level of education or training. The reports can identify the groups of occupations where a state is clearly not supplying a sufficient number of skilled workers to meet employer demand, and states and local areas can use this information to direct resources to boost supply where needed.

States that already have supply and demand reports should use the information to describe skill gaps in the state. States that do not yet have supply and demand reports should describe the steps they will take to create the reports.



For example, [Colorado's state plan](#) (pp. 22-23) includes milestones for the creation and use of an annual report on the match of labor supply and demand that will be used for strategic decision-making across agencies. [Massachusetts's state plan](#) (pp. 7-11) includes an analysis of supply and demand based on the ratio of online job postings and unemployment insurance beneficiaries. [Washington's state plan](#) (p. 8) includes the findings of the state's supply and demand report, lists the occupational fields where employer demand greatly exceeds the annual supply of newly trained workers, and calls for increasing capacity in those fields.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe the state's process for producing supply and demand reports. In states that already have supply and demand reports, the plan should describe the reports' findings on skill shortages and use that information to guide the plan's strategies for closing skill gaps.

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## COMMON METRICS AND DASHBOARDS

Common metrics across programs facilitate systemwide planning, program coordination and shared accountability for results. They also make it easier for policymakers to view and understand the performance of programs and the workforce development system as a whole. Dashboards present, in an easily accessible format, the key results of programs and the system as measured by common metrics.

One of the major achievements of WIOA is the establishment of a new set of common metrics ("primary indicators of performance") that apply to each of the four WIOA titles and to training providers funded by WIOA. Since the metrics were designed to be applicable to a very broad range of workforce development programs, they can be applied to programs beyond WIOA. Indeed, states are free to go beyond the minimum requirements of WIOA and apply the metrics to additional programs, such as CTE, SNAP E&T, TANF and/or others, helping to bring coherence to the broader system of workforce development.

States do not need a combined plan in order to extend WIOA common metrics to additional programs. The strategic portion of a unified plan may describe how a state will use the common metrics across workforce programs beyond the WIOA core programs. It may also discuss how the state will present performance information for multiple programs in a way that elected officials and policy leaders can easily understand.

Some state plans have already taken steps in this direction. Prior to the enactment of the WIOA common metrics, states moved to develop their own metrics for a range of programs beyond WIA. For example:

- [New Jersey's state plan](#) (p. 16) includes the establishment of common metrics to measure the performance of workforce development programs. It also includes the creation of dashboards to display results and "ensure that new metrics are disseminated to various audiences and that they drive program and policy decisions."
- [California's state plan](#) (p. 11) includes the action: "Develop common cross-system metrics, align performance outcome measures, monitor and report annually on progress towards goals."
- [Washington's state plan](#) (pp. 3-7) specifies seven state core measures to measure the results of each of the state's major workforce development programs and the system as a whole. Washington's [Workforce Training Results](#) displays the dashboards that use the state's core measures.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS:** The state plan should describe how the state will use the WIOA common metrics to measure the results of programs in addition to the core programs in WIOA. The state plan should describe the state's dashboard or the steps the state will take to create a dashboard that displays program and system results as measured by the WIOA common measures.

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## MEASURING CREDENTIALS

One of the common metrics required by WIOA is the percentage of participants who obtain a credential. In order to derive a percentage, states and local areas will have to count the absolute number of credentials obtained by participants.

This metric should spur additional training and skill attainment under WIOA. States and local areas, however, have been challenged to consistently and accurately count the full range of credentials provided by the workforce system. Addressing this challenge will require very concerted efforts by states and local areas.

The state plan should discuss the steps the state will take to provide a full count of postsecondary credentials that have value in the labor market. Such steps include:

- Using cross-agency credential measurements that capture credentials across all workforce development programs;
- Producing an unduplicated count of the total with breakdowns available by type of credential;
- Counting industry-based certifications and occupational licenses in addition to educational certificates and degrees.

For example, [Maryland's plan](#) (pp. 2-3) explains how the state will count all credentials that have value in the labor market across agencies and programs in order to track progress toward achieving the Governor's goal of increasing postsecondary credential attainment by 20 percent.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The State Plan should discuss the steps the state will take to provide a full count of postsecondary credentials that have value in the labor market.

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## SCORECARDS FOR STUDENTS AND WORKERS

Under WIOA, training providers must report their performance as measured by the WIOA common metrics. These providers must report outcomes for all their students, not just those students whose training is funded by a WIOA program. Moreover, the Administration has indicated that DOL will no longer issue waivers that allow a state to extend the period of initial eligibility for training providers under WIOA. Without this waiver, training providers must report employment outcomes for all students biennially to remain on the Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) and eligible for WIOA funding. The new ETPL requirements go into effect on July 23, 2015, although states may grandfather-in providers that were eligible under WIA until December 31, 2015.

The most efficient and consistent way to measure training providers' performance is for the state to first collect a small set of seed records from each provider for each student (e.g. social security number, program of study, start date, end date, credential, and demographic characteristics), and then link the records with unemployment insurance wage records and other administrative records used to determine outcomes. The state then shares overall program outcomes (not individuals' outcomes) with providers, local boards, and the general public through a web-based scorecard system. DOL and the Department of Education (DOE) will be identifying a template for reporting program outcomes. By using a common template to report outcome data for programs, states can create a meaningful scorecard for consumers that clearly shows the performance of each training program, using consistent metrics measured in a consistent way.

A few states have already created a comprehensive scorecard system. For example, as described in the performance accountability chapter of [Washington's state plan](#) (p. 11), "The Workforce Board operates a consumer report system of training provider results, as well as course descriptions and other key information for potential students at [www.careerbridge.wa.gov](http://www.careerbridge.wa.gov). This online consumer report system helps Washington residents make market-based decisions, moving their dollars from lesser to better

performing providers.” The details underlying Washington’s consumer scorecard and eligible training provider list may be found [here](#).

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe the state’s process, or the steps the state will take, to provide scorecards for consumers that show training program performance as measured by the WIOA common metrics for credential attainment, employment, and earnings.

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## UNIFIED AND COMPREHENSIVE DATA LINKING

In order for states to use the WIOA common metrics to measure provider, program, and system results, states must link participant records with databases, such as unemployment insurance wage records that are used for outcome information.

State plans are required to describe the state’s system for this data linking. States should consider systems that avoid duplication of effort and are as efficient as possible, including how workforce data can link to the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS).

For example, [Michigan’s state plan](#) (pp. 51-52) describes how the state will connect its state longitudinal data system and workforce longitudinal data to create a K-20W data system. [Massachusetts’s state plan](#) (pp. 39-41) discusses how Massachusetts is building its workforce-based data warehouse for all workforce programs and linking it to the state longitudinal data system. Finally, [Minnesota’s state plan](#) (pp. 12-13) has as one of its goals the integration of the state’s data systems.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should identify a comprehensive system for linking data across workforce and education agencies for the purpose of measuring outcomes.

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Data linking should extend beyond state lines in order to account for training participants who work in other states. The Wage Record Interchange System (WRIS) allows states to measure out-of-state employment and earnings for WIA program participants whereas WRIS2 provides this function for federal programs beyond WIOA. In order to more fully measure participant employment and earnings, the state should join WRIS2 so that the state can measure out-of-state employment and earnings for the broad array of workforce development programs.

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should describe the state’s participation in WRIS2 or action steps the state will take to participate in WRIS2.

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## VI. JOB-DRIVEN INVESTMENTS

States' investment in education and training should reflect the jobs in the state. Middle-skill jobs account for the largest share of the labor market in each of the 50 states, yet most states don't have enough workers trained to the middle-skill level, and states tend to invest far less in middle-skill training than other levels of higher education. For example, an [analysis of Connecticut's investments](#) shows that although three out of five jobs there are middle-skill, only one out of every five postsecondary dollars spent goes toward middle-skill education and training.

State plans must include an analysis of both employers' and workers' skill needs. The plans should also indicate how well the state's investments in education and training match those needs. States should use such analyses not only to identify skill gaps, but also to guide state investments in education and training. States plans should indicate how the state will invest its own education and training dollars in middle-skill programs that can close skill gaps.

WIOA emphasizes training that is directly connected to jobs, including incumbent worker training, on-the-job training, apprenticeship, and other types of work-based learning. By definition, sector partnerships and career pathways are also job-driven. State plans should identify how such training directly connected to jobs will be part of the state's strategy to close the skills gap. State plans should explain how the state will invest WIOA Title I statewide set-aside and other funds to support job-driven strategies.

For example, [Massachusetts' state plan](#) describes how the state uses a local workforce investment board certification process to make job-driven investments aimed at closing skill gaps (p. 26). The state plan explains that in order to be certified, local boards are required to have the following components:

- A strategic plan focused on the region's skill gaps that outlines how state and federal funding will be invested to address gaps;
- Evidence of industry partnerships;
- A dashboard tool to measure progress toward closing the skill gap and serving target populations;
- Metrics to measure the return on investment of key public programs; and
- Increased revenue outside of Department of Labor formula funding.

Similarly, [Michigan's state plan](#) articulates several ways in which the state is using the Michigan Industry Cluster Approach to make job-driven investments:

- It describes a process that Michigan workforce agencies use to identify industry-specific skill gaps, training to close the gap, and resources needed to promote training and recruit participants (p. 104).
- It explains that cluster-based training will be the priority for any available competitively procured and state discretionary funding, and that the state's industry cluster approach will be the focus of WIA statewide activities (pp. 106-107)
- It summarizes the state's WIA formula funding policy by stating "[i]t is the expectation of the Workforce Development Agency that WIA funds are used in support of a demand-driven system. Locally defined priority industries must be identified by local Workforce Development Boards and appropriate services developed and provided based upon input received from employers and other key partners." (p. 62)
- It details how apprenticeships, on-the-job training, incumbent worker training, and individual training accounts can be used to provide demand-driven training (pp. 107-108).

Under WIOA, states must consider how training providers relate to the state's in-demand industry sectors and occupations when compiling the Eligible Provider Training List (EPTL). A state plan should describe how the state will craft an EPTL that includes job-driven training.

For example, state plans for [Michigan](#) (p. 103) and [New Jersey](#) (Section B, page 8) both underscore the importance of engaging employers in the process of creating the high-demand occupations list and in turn aligning training with that list. [Kentucky's state plan](#) describes the state's intention to reform its EPTL to "reinforce priorities around high demand occupations, sustainable wages and career ladder goals." (p. 94).

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**RECOMMENDATION:** The state plan should identify and explain how state and federal funds will be invested to close the middle-skill gap. The plan should also describe how the state will invest in training directly connected to jobs. Investments in job-driven strategies should include the use of state set-aside funds under WIOA Title I.

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## CONCLUSION

WIOA promotes strategies that will grow our economy by helping workers and employers succeed. Policymakers can use WIOA to develop a workforce system that uses sector partnerships, career pathways, cross-program data and measurement, and job-driven investments to prepare a skilled workforce that meets employers' needs.

As one of the first actions required under WIOA, the state planning process provides an opportunity for policymakers to commit to this vision. In order to make that vision actionable, state plans should articulate how different programs, agencies, and stakeholders will work together to execute key strategies, including sector partnerships, career pathways, cross-program data and measurement, and job-driven investments. As states start on their WIOA plans, they should consider how to use a broad and authentic planning process to create a state plan structured around a vision of a workforce system that will help a wide range of workers and industries prosper.

## ABOUT NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION

National Skills Coalition is a non-partisan, broad-based coalition of employers, unions, education and training providers, and public officials working toward a vision of an America that grows its economy by investing in its people so that every worker and every industry has the skills to compete and prosper. We engage in organizing, advocacy, and communications to advance state and federal policies that support these goals — policies that are based on the on-the-ground expertise of our members.

National Skills Coalition was founded in 1998 as The Workforce Alliance in response to a series of federal policies that signaled the end of national investments in the skills of America's workers at a time when skill gaps were growing in key U.S. industries. Since then, we've demonstrated that investments in skills work. We've shown that diverse stakeholders can find agreement around specific reforms that will improve a variety of workforce education and training policies. And we have documented that the American public is strongly supportive of a deeper investment in the skills of America's workers. We continue to mobilize support for a new national skills agenda that cuts across public policies, and simultaneously serves a wide range of U.S. workers and industries.

National Skills Coalition is governed by a Board of Directors and advised by a national Leadership Council drawn from the ranks of business, labor, community colleges, community-based organizations, and the public workforce system.

More than 8,000 members, representing more than 3,000 organizations in all 50 states, comprise the broad-based membership of National Skills Coalition.

Learn more at [www.nationalskillscoalition.org](http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org).



**NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION**  
Every worker. Every industry. **A strong economy.**



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