

POLICY
PLATFORM

WORK
FORCE
DEVELOPMENT



ACT's Policy Platform

WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT





Jobs in the U.S. economy
are changing, requiring
more workers who have at
least some ***postsecondary
education or training.***



In 1973, 28 percent of jobs in the U.S. economy required at least some postsecondary education. According to projections from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, this number will have skyrocketed to 63 percent by 2018.¹

Jobs in the U.S. economy are changing, requiring more workers who have at least some postsecondary education or training. Workers will need additional education in part because many jobs that previously did not require higher education will require different or upgraded skills.² Many will need specialized technical skills and competencies for the particular jobs available in their communities as well as higher levels of foundational critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork skills that are important across all occupations.

Simply increasing the number of individuals with any type of postsecondary education will not necessarily provide workers with what they will need. First, education must be aligned with the needs of employers in their communities so that candidates can find jobs after completing training programs. Second, as highlighted in the ACT report *The Condition of Work Readiness in the United States* (2013), more education alone does not guarantee that individuals will acquire the skills and competencies needed for the jobs for which they are eligible based on their level of education. Rather, individuals must be ready to apply the knowledge gained in an academic setting to perform job-related tasks or to solve problems in the workplace.³

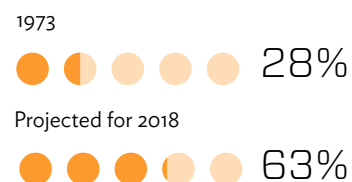
Reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the development of federal regulations to implement the newly enacted Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) offer opportunities to ensure that more education and training aligns with the needs of employers, leads to jobs, and helps individuals advance in their careers.

Driven by its mission of helping people succeed in education and the workplace, and leveraging more than 50 years of empirical evidence related to postsecondary readiness and academic achievement, ACT has identified specific opportunities to improve existing policies and craft new ones that can help more people succeed in the current and future workforce.

While this platform does not cover the entire spectrum of challenges faced in the workforce, it presents areas where ACT's research on and experience with vital education and workforce development issues provide relevant and compelling evidence to inform policy decisions.

READINESS in numbers

Percent of jobs in the U.S. economy
requiring at least some postsecondary
education



ACT's workforce development policy platform focuses on **three main issues:**

Improve Foundational Workplace Skills

Integrate foundational skills into relevant education and training programs in order to improve these skills among adults and youth, increase the benefits that people acquire from subsequent occupational training, and empower individuals to move along career paths.

Ensure That Training Is Valuable for Employers and Employees

Build the capacity of education and training programs to continually align training to the specific foundational and occupational skills needed of employers and industries, to ensure that training holds value for both employers and employees.

Help Individuals Attain Credentials

Pursue promising and innovative methods, targeted to particular populations, to help individuals attain credentials and seek additional training when needed.

In the following pages, each issue is explained and then followed by a set of related policy recommendations. While these recommendations are directed toward federal policymakers, greater coordination and collaboration with state legislatures, institution heads, and leaders in the business and philanthropic communities are necessary to implement these recommendations in ways that achieve sustainable and systematic results.

1 IMPROVE FOUNDATIONAL WORKPLACE SKILLS



Integrate foundational skills into relevant education and training programs in order to improve these skills among adults and youth, increase the benefits that people acquire from subsequent occupational training, and empower individuals to move along career paths.

Solid foundational skills are critical to an individual’s success in training and the workplace. Foundational skills have two important characteristics: they are fundamental and portable—fundamental in that they serve as the foundation for supporting more advanced skill development, and portable because they are important across a wide variety of occupations.⁴

Unfortunately, many U.S. workers lack the level of foundational skills needed for current and projected jobs. Data collected from individuals completing ACT WorkKeys® assessments between 2006 and 2011 show significant gaps between the foundational skills of examinees with a low level of education and the level of foundational skills needed for jobs requiring a low level of education.⁵ Integration of foundational skills into relevant education and training programs can improve these skills among adults and youth, increasing the benefits that people acquire from subsequent occupational training and empowering individuals with skills that they can take into any occupation.

Below are some examples of **cognitive** and **non-cognitive** foundational skills.

- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Listening for understanding
- Applied mathematics
- Reading for information
- Workplace observation
- Locating information

- Teamwork
- Work discipline
- Honesty with coworkers and supervisors
- Autonomy
- Conscientiousness about completing work on time

1st RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT RIGOROUS STANDARDS AND HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENTS: *Continue to support the implementation of college and career readiness standards and high-quality assessments in K–12 education.*

Many individuals enter the workplace without the essential foundational skills they need to succeed in further training or to move along a career pathway. Students who are still in the K–12 education system have a tremendous opportunity to cultivate cognitive and non-cognitive foundational skills before they leave school and enter the workforce.

As states continue to work toward defining and implementing more rigorous college and career readiness standards such as the Common Core State Standards, the urgent need for such standards is clear. Until more students are required to meet higher academic standards in the K–12 system, we will continue to see the following trends: persistent achievement gaps between underrepresented students and their peers,⁶ too few middle school students on target for college and career readiness,⁷ and too few high school students graduating ready for college and career.⁸

Demonstrating mastery of college and career readiness standards—such as the Common Core State Standards—through high-quality assessments is a critical step towards equipping students for postsecondary education and training, and eventually for workplace success and lifelong learning. The more successful the K–12 education system, the fewer public dollars will be needed later on for adult education and job training efforts.

2nd RECOMMENDATION

INTEGRATE NON-COGNITIVE FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS INTO CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE): *Support the integration of non-cognitive foundational skills, such as teamwork and work discipline, into the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act.*

The 2006 reauthorization of the Perkins Act facilitated great improvements in CTE by explicitly calling for the integration of academic skills such as reading and mathematics into CTE programs. This was an important step. But employers have made clear that, for new high school or community college graduates, academic and technical skills alone are not sufficient. Non-cognitive foundational skills (sometimes called “employability skills” under Perkins) such as teamwork and work discipline are among the most important skills cited by employers for new entrants into the labor force.⁹ Federal legislation designed to give CTE programs incentives to integrate these skills will benefit program participants.

3rd RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS THAT INTEGRATE BASIC FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS INTO OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING: *Expand successful programs in which participants learn literacy and numeracy skills in the context of an occupation while earning college-level professional/technical credits.*

The successful Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model in Washington state challenges the traditional notion that students must finish all levels of Adult Basic Education (ABE) before pursuing workforce education training programs. Through I-BEST programs, students earn college-level professional/technical credits that are part of career pathways. For instance, a basic-skills instructor and an instructor from a professional/technical program teach in the same classroom and collaborate on plans that integrate basic education with skills training. Rigorous evaluations show that I-BEST students are more likely to earn college credits and CTE credentials than their counterparts in regular ABE, General Educational Development (GED), or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.¹⁰ Federal policy should offer ABE programs incentives to incorporate occupational training models such as I-BEST.

CASE STUDY

TENNESSEE

Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology — Helping students increase foundational workplace skills *while participating in specific occupational training*

CHALLENGE Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) offer certificate and diploma programs in more than 50 distinct occupational fields, providing state-of-the-art training for workers to obtain the technical and professional skills necessary for advancement in today’s competitive job market. College leaders saw the need to integrate foundational skills training into the programs, so that students could enhance their foundational skills at the same time that they were completing their specific occupational training.

SOLUTION After enrolling in a TCATs program, students take an online assessment to measure their current level of foundational workplace skills. TCATs use a readiness assessment offered by ACT KeyTrain®, which supports ACT WorkKeys and the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate™ (NCRC). The NCRC is a portable credential that uses performance on selected ACT WorkKeys assessments to demonstrate achievement and a certain level of workplace employability skills.

As a requirement alongside their selected occupational program, students spend several hours each week in a Technology Foundations classroom, where they increase their foundational skills as they work through ACT KeyTrain’s web-based training curriculum until they reach a level indicating readiness to take the ACT WorkKeys exams and earn the NCRC.

RESULTS Nearly 6,000 TCATs students have earned the NCRC, and 87 percent of the certificates awarded are Gold or Silver. Many employers, educators, and students across the state recognize the value of the NCRC as a demonstration that students possess the foundational workplace skills needed to accompany specific occupational training.

2 ENSURE THAT TRAINING IS VALUABLE FOR EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES



Build the capacity of education and training programs to continually align training to the specific foundational and occupational skills needed of employers and industries, to ensure that training holds value for both employers and employees.

Training that does not provide the specific skills and competencies needed to obtain a job and advance in a career is unproductive for both trainees and employers. As the skill needs of employers evolve, education and training programs must stay aligned with the needs of regional employers and industries. Local and regional models that are promising in this regard—industry-recognized credentials, sector initiatives, and community college/industry partnerships—need continued federal support if they are to have greater impact.

1st RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CREDENTIALS: *Create a mechanism by which industry-recognized credentials can be approved for use of federal funds.*

Systems that certify credentials for occupations in specific industries show great promise.¹¹ Such credentials are often based on industry competency models developed jointly between the federal government and industry associations. For example, the Manufacturing Skills Certification System (MSCS), endorsed by the National Association of Manufacturers, is a system of industry-based credentials that can apply to all sectors in the manufacturing industry. The ACT National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) is the foundational credential in the MSCS system. These credentials validate the skills and competencies needed for workers to be productive and successful in any manufacturing environment.¹² The federal government should formally recognize such credentialing systems as eligible for federal spending. Congress has taken an important first step in this direction by prioritizing industry-recognized credentials under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014.

2nd RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT SECTOR INITIATIVES: *Create competitive grants for regional sector initiatives in order to align training to employer needs and to help individuals attain employment outcomes more quickly.*

Sector initiatives are regional, industry-focused approaches to workforce and economic development intended to improve access to good jobs and increase job quality in ways that strengthen an industry’s workforce.¹³ In particular, sector partnerships are groups of employers within an industry that bring together government, education, training, economic development, labor, and community organizations to focus on the industry’s workforce needs within a regional labor market.¹⁴ More than 1,000 such partnerships exist around the country.¹⁵

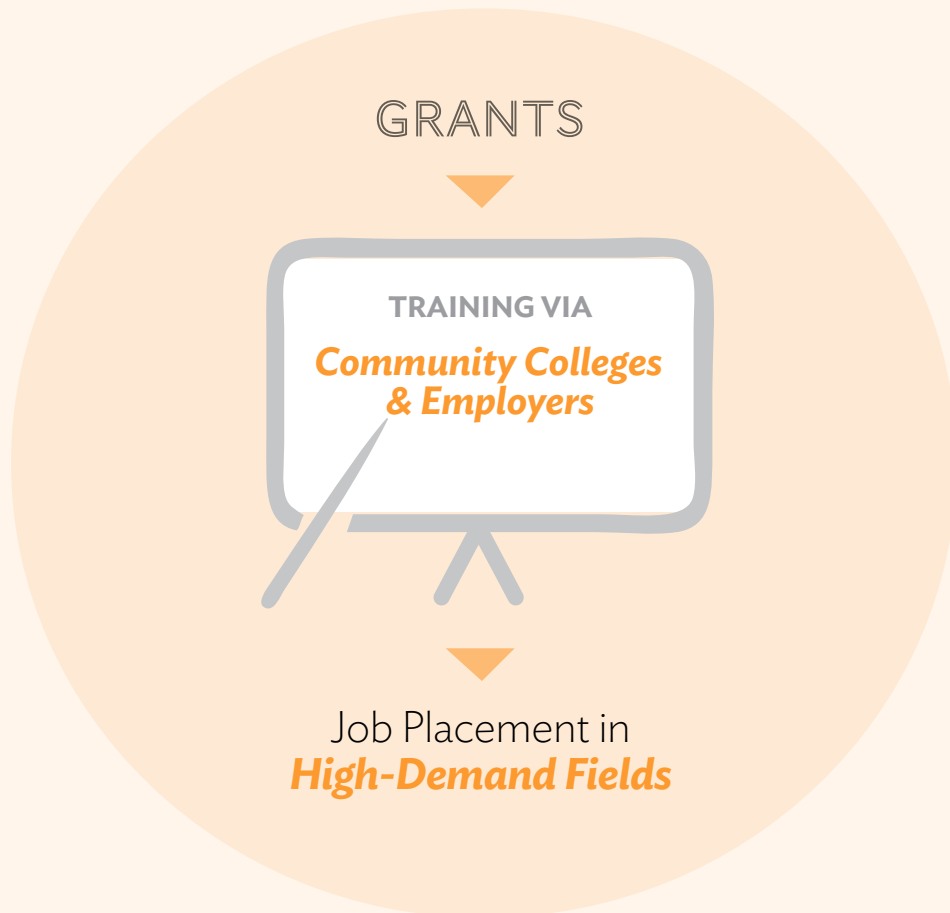
Because the partnerships are led by employers, training developed as part of a sector partnership is more likely to be aligned with the needs of employers in that industry. As a result, sector partnerships are among the few workforce interventions that evidence shows improve employment opportunities for workers and increase their wages once on the job.¹⁶ A dedicated but competitive funding stream for sector partnerships would help ensure that the growing number of sector initiatives remain of high quality and dedicated to benefitting both employers and workers.

3rd RECOMMENDATION

SUPPORT COMMUNITY COLLEGE/INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS: *Leverage knowledge gained through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program to support lasting partnerships between community colleges, industry associations, and local employers.*

First funded by Congress in 2010, the \$2 billion TAACCCT program provides capacity-building grants to drive innovation and the development of model training programs at community colleges. Now in its fourth and final round of grants, TAACCCT focuses on preparing unemployed and under-employed adults for high-wage, high-skill jobs. Previous grantees have transformed the design and delivery of courses through accelerated learning strategies, redesigned curricula, and technology-enhanced learning activities.¹⁷ The final round of grantees was encouraged to partner with industry associations.

Because each grantee’s program will have a rigorous evaluation, these evaluations could provide the Department of Labor and Congress with a great deal of knowledge on how the federal government can best support strong and lasting community college/industry partnerships. That knowledge should be leveraged in future policy or funding decisions—for example, about whether TAACCCT grants should be continued or expanded after the final round.





CASE STUDY

Greenville Works – *Matching employer needs with job seekers*

CHALLENGE

Greenville Works was launched in the summer of 2009 to provide a coordinated and strategic approach to next-generation workforce development in Greenville County, South Carolina. Leaders of the organization identified four challenges they would need to address: 1) the need for more feedback from business to understand their needs; 2) how to use that feedback to work with educators to develop curricula to meet those needs; 3) how best to provide career-related information and advising to individuals; and 4) the need to build strong, sector-based, and industry-recognized credentialing programs to ensure a solid pool of skilled employees.

SOLUTION

Greenville Works' executive director visited more than 250 businesses to gather information about their needs. One clear message was that area businesses required workers with a wider variety of skills sets than they had in the past—including foundational skills such as problem solving and critical thinking.

The area's Lifelong Learning Center (part of the Greenville County schools system) responded in part by expanding a course built around ACT WorkKeys and ACT's National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC). Individuals who earned the NCRC found advantages at many local businesses. For example, an early NCRC adopter was Itron, a provider of energy and water resource management solutions. Itron's plant in West Union employs more than 750 full-time employees to design and build meters to measure electricity use. Itron has profiled 35 job positions, representing 100% of its hourly production positions. When job openings are posted, applicants—both internally and externally—must have the NCRC level required for the foundational skills designated by the position profile to apply.

RESULTS

Since introduction of the course, employers have profiled more than 800 jobs, and more than 250 employers recognize, request, or require the NCRC from job applicants. At the same time, more than 7,200 individuals have earned the NCRC. As a result of their efforts, the Greenville Region Workforce Collaborative has generated funding pledges of \$1.9 million to help build foundational skills training for job seekers in sector-based programs.

3 HELP INDIVIDUALS ATTAIN CREDENTIALS

Pursue promising and innovative methods, targeted to particular populations, to help individuals attain credentials and seek additional training when needed.



It is more important than ever for individuals in training to complete their programs and earn a credential. It is equally important that they be able to build on their initial credential when different skills and competencies become needed.

Different groups of people will likely benefit from different types of policy interventions to help complete credentials. Three important factors are their age, whether they are in school, and whether they are working. For example, adults who return to school while working full time face a very different set of challenges than disconnected youth—young people who are in neither school nor work. Dislocated workers—often older workers who lose their jobs because, for example, a plant closes—have needs very different from lower-skilled adults who may never have had a strong attachment to the labor force. Each recommendation below addresses one of these groups.

1st RECOMMENDATION

ENCOURAGE HIGH-QUALITY COMPETENCY-BASED OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR WORKING ADULTS: *Ensure that competency-based occupational training supports high-quality education and enables working learners to enter, complete, and return to training when necessary.*

A 2012 Gallup/Lumina Foundation Poll found that a full 70 percent of those polled do not believe that learning should be based on seat time and agree that if a student demonstrates they have mastered class material in less than the length of a class session, they should be able to get credit for the course without sitting through the entire session.¹⁸ In other words, mastery, not time spent in the classroom, should matter most in awarding college credit. Models of competency-based education, through which learning is measured through mastery and not seat-time, would be particularly helpful for working adults who would thereby gain the flexibility to either accelerate through material (making them more likely to complete) or start and stop as needed (which may make it easier to reenter training at a later time).

Several institutions of higher education (e.g., Southern New Hampshire University and the University of Wisconsin Extension) are forging ahead in online competency-based education tied to credit-bearing courses. Few non-credit occupational programs are following suit, however, because of barriers unique to non-credit coursework—for example, the fact that such coursework cannot be paid for through Pell Grants—while those occupational programs that do include competency-based education are limited in scale and vary greatly in method and cost for working learners.¹⁹ Federal policy should support both credit-bearing and non-credit occupational programs in incorporating competency-based education.

2nd RECOMMENDATION

HELP UNEMPLOYED AND LOWER-SKILLED ADULTS ENTER CAREER PATHWAYS: *When individuals come into public workforce programs they should be able to access a career pathway, no matter how low their level of education.*

When individuals do not have the foundational skills to succeed in conventional training programs, it is very important that they be able to start on a career pathway at the level most useful to them. According to the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, career pathways are a “series of connected education and training strategies and support services that enable individuals to secure industry relevant certification and obtain employment . . . [while advancing] to higher levels of future education and employment.” The emerging career pathways approach allows those with limited education and work experience to access a pathway associated with a particular set of careers—for example, in health care or manufacturing—that has “off-ramps” to employment and “on-ramps” to re-enter training at any point along the pathway.

For example, a health care career pathway for a low-skilled adult may begin with integrated ABE and occupational training enabling the trainee to qualify for a job as a personal home health aide. At this point, the individual may leave training and enter employment, or continue in education to become a certified nursing assistant (CNA). Again, the trainee could enter the workforce as a CNA, or continue in education toward a two-year Registered Nurse (RN) degree, a four-year RN degree, or beyond.

To facilitate career pathway models, various federal funding streams, such as Pell Grants and job training funds, will need to be more seamless and integrated.

3rd RECOMMENDATION

UNDERSTAND THE CHANGING NEEDS OF DISLOCATED WORKERS: *Facilitate the collection of information on the changing needs and characteristics of dislocated workers to tailor future programs and initiatives to new economic realities.*

From 2009 through 2011, 6.1 million workers were displaced from jobs they had held for at least three years.²⁰ Dislocated workers include individuals who have been terminated or laid off or received notification of termination or layoff from employment as result of a permanent closure or substantial layoff.²¹ These workers particularly benefit from programs that help them acquire credentials and return to work in an accelerated manner.

However, the particular needs of dislocated workers in the future may be very different. Changes in the structure of the economy and the labor market may mean that workers become less likely to be truly dislocated, but rather need to “up-skill”

throughout their lives as technology changes. Data collection and analysis, in this case as in many others, is extremely important. Without the requisite data on the changing needs of dislocated workers, services provided to help them—funded through the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act and the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act—risk falling short of their actual needs. Federal policy should prioritize data collection on the changing nature of dislocation and dislocated workers to inform future policy priorities.

FEDERAL AND STATE FUNDING IN ACTION

What happened to Ohio workers
when manufacturing plants closed?

70%

of those who gained certification
for their workplace skills found new
opportunities.

45%

found new jobs.

25%

pursued postsecondary
education/training.

CASE STUDY



Ohio—Addressing unique needs of *dislocated workers*

CHALLENGE

Thousands of manufacturing employees in Ohio, many with decades of experience but no certifications or diplomas indicative of their skill levels, found themselves facing unemployment as plants closed across the state. Under the federal Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act, employers planning a closure or mass layoff must provide 60 days' notice to affected workers. Soon after each WARN notice was issued, hundreds of workers faced a date just two months away when they would no longer have a job. Meanwhile, those employers who were hiring needed motivated and skilled workers to operate their production equipment, but required an objective measure of the skills each prospective employee possessed.

SOLUTION

Funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the State of Ohio made it possible to install up to 20 laptop computers in a lab at each company for use by the still-employed workers before or after their shifts. Additional transition centers with computers were available at other sites. Employees facing displacement were able to work through ACT KeyTrain curricula to prepare for their ACT WorkKeys assessments, take the assessments to earn an ACT National Career Readiness Certificate, and attend classes and complete coursework and testing to earn the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council's Certified Production Technician (MSSC CPT) certificate.

RESULTS

Seven in 10 dislocated workers found employment or entered additional training. Of the individuals who earned both the NCRC and MSSC CPT, 45 percent found employment. Another 25 percent entered a postsecondary education/training program rather than seek immediate reemployment.



The recommendations offered
in this platform will help
establish a framework
that improves students' experience
navigating the career portion of
the continuum.

ACT's mission is to help people achieve education and workplace success.

ACT's mission is to help people achieve education and workplace success. At a time when the nation's economy is quickly changing and the skill needs of employers are constantly shifting, this Workforce Development Policy Platform extends that mission into the public policy arena, bringing ACT's unique experience and research in education and workforce assessment to bear on the challenge of ensuring that all students are able to progress successfully along the continuum from kindergarten through career. The recommendations offered in this platform—to increase foundational skills, ensure that training is valuable for employers and employees, and help adults complete credentials—will help establish a framework that improves individuals' experience navigating the career portion of the continuum.

To be effective, workforce development efforts must be coordinated with improvements to our K-12 and postsecondary systems. This is why ACT has prepared three Policy Platforms – K-12 Education, Postsecondary Education, and Workforce Development – with related recommendations.

ALL OF ACT'S POLICY PLATFORMS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE:

www.act.org/policyplatforms

Notes

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