

Illinois Common Career Pathways Definition and Guidance

Introduction to WIOA Career Pathways Definition

A career pathway means a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that aligns both vertically and horizontally across Secondary Education, Adult Education, Workforce Training and Development, Career and Technical Education, and Postsecondary Education systems, pathways, and programs. Collaborative partnerships with these entities and business and industry, along with human service agencies, corrections, and other community stakeholders, serve as the foundational structure for high-quality and sustainable career pathways. A career pathway also includes multiple entry and exit points to facilitate individuals to build their skills as they progress along a continuum of education and training and advance in sector-specific employment.

The following guidance should help policymakers and practitioners implement state, regional, and local career pathways. The guidance is meant to clarify how a successful pathway—often comprised of one or more career pathway programs—should operate. This guidance also addresses the career pathway system, which sets the policies and procedures that shape career pathways and can assist with strong pathway development and sustainability. A- G represents elements of the WIOA Career Pathways definition, with added guidance to clarify and provide additional detail for each element.

(A) Aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved;

Career pathways should:

- Use labor market data, informed by state, regional, and local employers, to design sector-focused programs that meet the needs of the employers in the state, regional, and local economies.
- Regularly and meaningfully engage employers at every stage of pathway development in an interactive, ongoing relationship¹ and encourage employers to assume leadership roles
- Identify the certifications, licenses, and industry-recognized credentials that state, regional, and local employers require and craft programs leading to them.

¹ “Meaningful employer engagement” is the process by which State and/or local stakeholders (e.g. training providers, colleges, workforce boards) convene with local and regional industry employers to discuss the skill and credential needs of their workforce and ways in which education and training programs can best prepare individuals.

(B) Prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including apprenticeships registered under the National Apprenticeship Act.²

Career pathways should:

- Enable lifelong learning that ensures youth and adult participants can gain entry to and advance, as desired, through successive education and training programs, leading to stackable credentials³ in a given occupational cluster.
- Lead to jobs in increasingly high-skill, high-wage, and/or high-demand industries.
- Ensure access and appropriate services for the targeted populations included in the State of Illinois Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Unified State Plan.⁴

(C) Includes counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual’s education and career goals;

Career pathways should:

- Ensure participants have access to career exploration, academic advising, support with transitions through the pathway, and comprehensive individualized support services, such as, but not limited to, child care, transportation, and financial aid (where appropriate).
- Involve partnerships among K-12, postsecondary educational institutions, workforce training and development agencies, public and private employers, workforce boards, human services providers, and other partners to ensure participant access to the above services.

² The Act of August 16, 1937 (commonly known as the “National Apprenticeship Act”; 50 Stat. 664, chapter 663; 29 U.S.C. 50 et seq.).

³ A stackable credential is part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time and move an individual along a career pathway or up a career ladder.

⁴ Priority populations identified in the [State of Illinois Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Unified State Plan](#) are: Long-term unemployed; Low-income adults; Low literacy adults, including those without a high school diploma; Low-skilled adults; Individuals with disabilities, including youth with disabilities; Those receiving public assistance; Out-of-school youth; Veterans; Migrant and seasonal farm workers; Re-entry individuals (ex-offenders); English Language Learners; Older individuals; Homeless individuals; Single parents; Youth in the foster system or who have aged out; Displaced homemakers; Veterans with disabilities; Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

(D) Includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities⁵ and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;

Career pathways should:

- Include career-focused instruction that integrates academic and technical content with foundational professional skills⁶, which are skills needed for success in education, and training, career, and life.
- Offer opportunities for work-based learning⁷ experiences.
- Offer job placement assistant services that are tailored to participant needs at different points along the pathway.

(E) Organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates the educational and career advancement of the individual to the extent practicable;

Career pathways should:

- Offer quality, non-duplicative training, coursework, assignments, and assessments⁸ to accelerate progress, maximize credit and credential attainment, and increase student success.
- Encourage concurrent enrollment and early college credit opportunities that support progression through the pathway.
- Offer participant-focused education and training that incorporates flexible class formats, locations, and times that makes learning accessible and achievable for all populations. Strategies include, but are not limited to, modularized curriculum⁹, contextualized curriculum and instruction¹⁰, and virtual learning.

⁵ “Workforce preparation activities” means activities, programs, or services designed to help an individual acquire a combination of basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in utilizing resources, using information, working with others, understanding systems, and obtaining skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of postsecondary education or training, or employment. WIOA HR 803, SEC. 203. DEFINITIONS (17)

⁶ “Foundational professional skills” (often also called “soft skills” or “essential skills”) are the skills needed for success in college, career, and life, such as, but not limited to, punctuality, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving.

⁷ Work-based learning provides participants with work-based opportunities to practice and enhance the skills and knowledge gained in their program of study or industry training program, as well as to develop employability. Examples include: Internships, service learning, paid work experience, on-the-job training, incumbent worker training, transitional jobs, and apprenticeships.

⁸ Non-duplicative (across education and training partners) assessments of participants’ education, skills, competencies, assets, and support service needs as they move through a career pathway and its programs.

⁹ “Modularized curriculum” is curriculum that is divided into shorter, ‘self-contained’ segments or chunks of instruction. The common module length can vary depending upon content, format, and schedule of the course.

¹⁰ “Contextualized curriculum and instruction” is the practice of systematically connecting basic skills and academic instruction to industry, or occupational content.

(F) Enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least 1 recognized postsecondary credential; and

Career pathways should:

- Create partnerships between programs that serve youth and adults of all skill levels to ensure that participants can in time earn a recognized postsecondary credential¹¹, as desired.
- Enable participants to gain entry to or advance within a given sector or occupational cluster, facilitate efficient transitions to continuing education, and incorporate stackable and portable industry-recognized credentials.
- Facilitate co-enrollment in programs administered by the core¹² and required¹³ partners (as defined by WIOA), in addition to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T).

(G) Helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

Career pathways should:

- Involve partnerships with employers to support participant educational and career advancement through on-the-job training, customized training, corporate training, incumbent worker training¹⁴, and other work-based training strategies.
- Overcome barriers to entry to ensure that participants with diverse backgrounds and experience have the opportunity to enroll and succeed in a pathway.

An effective and efficient career pathway will also commit to equity for all participants and potential participants and continuous improvement. To ensure that is possible, the system will:

¹¹ “Recognized post-secondary credential”, as defined by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, means a credential consisting of an industry-recognized certificate or certification, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship, a license recognized by the State involved or Federal Government, or an associate or baccalaureate degree. <https://www.doleta.gov/wioa/Docs/wioa-regs-labor-final-rule.pdf>
[WIOA sec. 3\(52\)](#)

¹² Core programs within WIOA are: WIOA Title I (Adult, Dislocated Worker and Youth formula programs) administered by Department of Labor (DOL); Adult Education and Literacy Act programs administered by the Department of Education (DoED); Wagner-Peyser Act employment services administered by DOL; and Rehabilitation Act Title I programs administered by DoED.

¹³ Required programs within WIOA are: Career and Technical Education (Perkins), Community Services Block Grant, Indian and Native American Programs, HUD Employment and Training Programs, Job Corps, Local Veterans' Employment Representatives and Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program, National Farmworker Jobs Program, Senior Community Service Employment Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Trade Adjustment Assistance Programs, Unemployment Compensation Programs, and YouthBuild

¹⁴ “Incumbent worker training” is training that is developed with an employer or employer association (group of employers) to retain a skilled workforce or avert the need to lay off employees by assisting the workers in obtaining the skills necessary to retain employment.

- Collect, share, and use evidence to identify and eliminate barriers to participant access and success.
- Include shared qualitative and quantitative evaluation of participant outcomes, with a focus on equity of access and services across participant groups, to inform the improvement of all programs within the pathway as well as the pathway itself.
- Disaggregate participant-level data to identify inequities in performance among participant groups and improve the outcomes of different participant groups.
- Include shared qualitative and quantitative evaluation of effectiveness in serving employers (the business community) in order to inform strategies for improvement.