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# **CURRENT STATE OF K-12 TO POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher education remains a pivotal driver of social and economic mobility, with college graduates earning significantly more over their lifetimes compared to their peers without a degree. However, the benefits of higher education remain out of reach for an increasing number of students, as enrollments [decline](#) and stopout rates climb. In recent years, pathway programs have emerged as a crucial tool — not only boosting enrollment but also ensuring students persist to degree completion. These programs can create more seamless transitions between

high school, college and the workforce. This paper showcases several promising pathway programs that aim to better integrate K-12 education, postsecondary education and the workforce. By spotlighting these success stories, this paper provides a trajectory for colleges and universities committed to blurring the divides between K-12, postsecondary and work and improve outcomes for learners. This paper also advocates for the robust policy interventions at both state and federal levels to support such initiatives.





## INTRODUCTION FROM TIMOTHY KNOWLES

Over the past two decades, the higher education landscape has changed dramatically, with a growing number of colleges and universities facing existential threats.

The pressure is being driven by several factors:

### FALLING ENROLLMENTS

While enrollment in four-year universities [has trended up modestly](#) since the pandemic, the number of students going to college has been falling [for more than a decade](#). This drop portends significant, longer-term declines in the number of college-age students — a phenomenon some observers characterize as a [“demographic cliff.”](#)

### ESCALATING COSTS

The average cost of a college credit has risen significantly over the last several decades, from less than \$200 per credit in the 1980s to more than \$600 today, adjusted for inflation.

These increases don’t include the costs of housing, food or fees, nor do they account for the significant decrease in per-pupil state investment in higher education over the last 30 years. Taken together, students and families are bearing substantially more of the costs of postsecondary learning than in the past.

### PUBLIC PERCEPTION

There have also been profound [shifts in public perception](#) about the value of higher education, evident across multiple demographics. According to Gallup, Americans’ confidence in higher education fell to 36% in 2023, substantially lower than in 2015 (57%) and 2018 (48%).



## FAILURE RATES

Even when students do matriculate to college, [nearly 40%](#) do not finish. Today, the ranks of working-age Americans with no credentials to show for the time and money they spent on college has grown to [nearly 37 million](#). These numbers remain particularly stark for underrepresented learners and students from low-income backgrounds, who continue to graduate at substantially [lower rates](#) than their middle-income, white and Asian peers. And men are now [11 percentage points less likely](#) to graduate from a four-year institution than women.

Despite these compounding pressures, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that higher education remains the most direct and dependable vehicle for social and economic uplift in the United States. On average, an individual with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn [a median lifetime income of \\$2.8 million](#) — 75% more than someone who only completed high school. The real risk then of America's growing detachment from higher education is not the risk to institutions' bottom line but the risk of a generation becoming disconnected from the country's most reliable route to economic stability and upward mobility.

This paper focuses on one important method to addressing these complex challenges: building much more robust pathways from K-12, to postsecondary to work. While such efforts are by no means new nor a panacea unto themselves, building clear pathways for learners is an essential part of the path forward.

As Dr. Shirley M. Collado, president and CEO of the national college completion organization College Track and president emerita of Ithaca



College, puts it: “For far too long, our nation’s high schools, postsecondary institutions and workforce development programs have operated in separate silos. Higher education has not built the partnerships to the extent necessary to create an ecosystem that allows all of the pieces to work together much more seamlessly for young people.”

With [72% of all U.S. jobs](#) requiring a credential beyond a high school diploma by 2031, creating vertically integrated education and workforce pathways has become a national imperative — one that can help to rebuild learners’ trust in the postsecondary sector and secure the futures of a generation at risk.

— Timothy Knowles



# CURRENT STATE OF K-12 TO POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

## PATHWAY PROGRAMS DEFINED

Pathway programs are structured educational tracks designed to seamlessly transition students from high school to higher education or directly into the workforce. They might include academic courses aligned with college expectations and requirements, career and technical education (CTE) sequences that ramp up to an industry-recognized certificate, and support services like counseling and mentoring. Students can now take advantage of programs that prepare them for one day going to nursing or law school, for instance, or courses that result in a career-ready certification that can help them immediately land a job. Here are just a few of the programs students currently have access to:

**Dual Enrollment:** Programs that allow high school students to take college courses and earn credits that count toward both high school and college graduation.

**Early College:** High school programs that enable students to earn an associate degree

or a significant number of college credits by the time they graduate high school.

**Apprenticeships and (CTE) Sequences:**

Specialized courses — offered at both the high school and postsecondary level — that provide students with hands-on training and skills needed for specific industries, often leading to an industry-recognized credential.

**Meta Majors:** Broad academic pathways that group related fields of study to help students choose a general area of interest before narrowing down to a specific major.

**Institution-Specific Pathways:** Partnerships between postsecondary institutions and high schools or districts that allow for seamless and intentional pathways — such as guaranteed admission programs — to specific colleges and universities.

The [diversity and number of pathway programs](#) have grown dramatically in recent years. Last year, students participating in dual-enrollment programs — an increasingly common approach to building a bridge from high school to college, [accounted for nearly](#)

[30%](#) of the total increase in undergraduate enrollment. This growth couldn't come at a more critical time. Only [1 in 5 students](#) are graduating from high school prepared to succeed in college-level coursework. And many young people are not ready for the

workforce; [one-third of individuals](#) between age 16 and 24 say they have little to no idea what career they want to pursue.

Pathway programs offer students solutions on both fronts, allowing students to directly connect with colleges prior to high school graduation and to explore potential careers from an earlier age. With research showing deepening disparities in college and career outcomes among underrepresented and economically disadvantaged student populations, school districts and colleges are beginning to design specific pathways to bridge racial and socioeconomic gaps.

Pathway programs are intentionally designed to orient course offerings and learning experiences around specific postsecondary programs and career opportunities. This alignment ensures that high school students accumulate the necessary knowledge, skills and credits to transition more smoothly into the workforce or higher education. This paper focuses on the latter, emphasizing programs that not only facilitate college enrollment but also prepare students to thrive immediately once they arrive on campus.

“The goal is to really get in front of students to ensure that we are getting them to graduation within a reasonable four-year time frame,” says Madeline Martinez, associate director of the Center for Academic Excellence at North Carolina A&T.

Evidence of the success of comprehensive pathway programs is growing. In Colorado, for example, where [state leaders have been](#), as Colorado Governor Jared Polis writes, “laser-focused on blurring the lines between high school, higher education, and the workforce,” more than half of high school graduates now earn college credit or industry

credentials through dual and concurrent enrollment programs.

A recent study from the American Association of Community Colleges and the Community College Research Center (CCRC), meanwhile, [found that institutions](#) that have scaled guided pathways programs saw significant improvements in student success measures five years after initial implementation. The CCRC also found, however, that such pathway programs require considerable time and effort — as well as major shifts in policy — to implement effectively.

Clearly, not all pathway programs are created equal. Variations in program design, implementation, and the relationship between K-12 districts and higher education systems can significantly influence outcomes. This paper identifies several key characteristics that are fundamental to setting up such programs for success, offering insights into how best to structure and sustain effective pathway programs.



# **POLICIES, PRACTICE AND INTERVENTIONS BEHIND SUCCESSFUL K-12 TO POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS**

Through a comprehensive examination of dozens of colleges and universities and a series of interviews with higher education leaders whose institutions have created exemplary student pathway programs, we have identified four critical features that drive the success of pathway programs, leading to improved access and outcomes for students.

## **VERTICAL INTEGRATION WITH K-12 SYSTEMS**

Institutions of higher education cannot effectively bridge the gap between high school and college without actively and consistently collaborating with high school and district leaders. Although this idea may seem obvious, the separation of K-12 and higher education into distinct silos often complicates this necessary partnership. The result is a bumpy transition where there should instead be a clear, frictionless pathway.

The challenge of bridging the gap between high school and college is one that City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) are intimately familiar with. Today, the partnership between the two systems has resulted in several effective pathway programs. More than a decade ago, however, the relationship between the two was distant. When the city launched a program providing free tuition at any CCC for public high school students meeting certain academic requirements — a [program](#) that still exists today — then-Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel recognized that the program's impact would be muted by the lack of

cohesion between CCC and the public school system. In response, he mandated weekly meetings for leaders from both systems to discuss their common goals and commitment to Chicago's students.

Motivated by this high-level directive, the philanthropic community stepped forward to help facilitate a more structured type of collaboration. This led to the development of the “Chicago Roadmap” — an ambitious initiative designed to ensure students were college-ready in both math and English to create seamless and early pathways to postsecondary learning and to ramp up career exploration and experiences. Twenty-five working groups comprising leaders from across CCC and CPS worked on the plan, creating a partnership that fostered deep, ongoing collaboration that prioritizes student success to this day.

In New York, the city's public K-12 system and City University of New York (CUNY) have long fostered this kind of deeply integrated partnership. The two systems have a mutual agreement in place to co-fund their pathway programs. The collaboration is supported by a robust — and critical — data-sharing agreement that has been in effect for a decade. Regular quarterly meetings between CUNY leaders and New York City Public Schools leadership, along with other key city officials, are instrumental in maintaining the alliance and identifying and overcoming shared challenges.



## CITY COLLEGES OF CHICAGO: STRENGTHENING PATHWAYS THROUGH SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

*City Colleges of Chicago*

Location: Chicago

Enrollment: 77,000

As the largest community college system in Illinois, City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) plays a pivotal role in shaping the futures of a diverse student population drawn from every corner of the city. With just one-third of Chicago public school graduates graduating college within four years, CCC has worked to proactively forge stronger partnerships with the city's public schools to construct seamless pathways that enhance student success and completion rates. CCC is aiming to reach a 55% completion rate for all students within the next decade. While graduation rates have tripled overall since 2009, many of the system's institutions remain below 30%.

CCC's "Roadmap 2.0" initiative seeks to synchronize high school and college curricula, ensuring that students are well-prepared for community college, their future careers, and pursuing a bachelor's degree. For more than a decade, each City College has been dedicated to a specific professional track and Chicago high school students can now enroll

in "cornerstone courses" that connect them to community college and prepare them for success in future careers or bachelor's degree programs. These courses — which include classes focused on in-demand fields like health care or engineering — are baked into their school curriculum and embedded into the regular school day.

In addition, CCC deploys 18 dedicated postsecondary navigators across 91 high schools throughout the city. Each navigator has a scheduled caseload, visiting designated schools on specific days to meet with students to discuss the variety of programs students can pursue. Navigators also assist students with practical steps such as filling out college applications, completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and preparing for placement tests. This strategic partnership with the city's public schools is yielding results. Last year, CCC's fall enrollment increased more than double the state average.

## SECURING BROAD-BASED SUPPORT

Robust collaboration with K-12 leaders and educators is not the only kind of coalition-building that institutions must attend to. Ensuring similar levels of collaboration within and across an institution or system is just as important. Many successful pathway programs are rooted in a bottom-up approach that brings key institutional stakeholders to a common table — from faculty and academic advisors to deans and provosts — from the beginning.

“If you ever find yourself saying the word ‘buy-in,’ you’ve done something wrong,” says Shonda Gibson, senior associate vice chancellor academic affairs and chief transformation officer at Texas A&M University System. “If you have everyone around the table who needs to be there, then you won’t need to have buy-in. Securing buy-in once you’ve launched a program means you’ve already left people out.”

Famously resistant to change and ruled by intricate systems of faculty and administrative governance, higher education often presents a challenging environment for fostering broad collaboration. Across the 11 universities within the Texas A&M University System, administrators have successfully navigated these challenges by emphasizing cooperative engagement.

Regular workshops and strategy sessions involving key representatives from across the system’s campuses — typically deans and department chairs — have cultivated a spirit of cooperation and collective ownership in the development of its pathway programs. By engaging representatives from across a wide range of levels and departments early in the process, institutions can foster a proactive culture that anticipates and collaboratively addresses potential challenges.

The regular cadence of interactions enhances the commitment of stakeholders and ensures that the programs evolve with the changing educational landscape and continue to meet the diverse needs of students.

## DATA-DRIVEN IMPROVEMENT

While it may be tempting to rapidly scale up promising new initiatives to reach as many students as possible, the most successful pathway programs are characterized by a methodical, data-driven approach to research, development and improvement. CCRC has found that it generally [takes at least five years](#) for an institution to fully implement and scale a pathways program. Successful institutions take an iterative approach that builds and expands upon the success of pilots and other early-stage programs as well as hard data and research around outcomes. Of course, a pilot program is not the end goal but an essential first step.

To enhance the success of its pathway programs, the Texas A&M University System engages in a process of continuous improvement. This method involves implementing small, measurable interventions, allowing the institution to observe effects and make data-driven decisions about broader implementation. In its teaching programs, for instance, data-sharing agreements with local high schools allow leaders to examine the institution’s success in preparing educators to transition into district teaching roles.

Indeed, data is central to the success of all pathway programs. For CCC, data helps inform where the system focuses its efforts across a city as large and diverse as Chicago. When the system observed a decline in Black enrollment, CCC intensified its outreach strategies in schools located on the south and west sides of the city. Since fall 2021, CCC’s Black male enrollment has increased by 35%,



Latine male enrollment is up 31%, Black female enrollment has risen by 28% and Latine female enrollment has grown by 17%.

“We’re always looking at our data,” says Stacia Edwards, deputy provost of CCC. “We are always asking, ‘Who are we missing?’”

## CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK: THOUGHTFULLY SCALING PATHWAYS THROUGH ITERATIVE PILOTING

*City University of New York*

Location: New York, New York

Enrollment: 225,000

The City University of New York’s (CUNY) approach to its pathway programs is marked by its careful, iterative approach. CUNY’s success hinges not on securing extensive initial investments but on creatively piloting small-scale initiatives to gather insights before committing to — or asking for — broader investments.

At the heart of CUNY’s strategic approach is a robust partnership with New York City’s public schools, bolstered by a crucial data-sharing agreement that provides a rich infrastructure to support pilot programs. This partnership allows CUNY to implement pilot programs that, while initially small in scope, have the potential for wide-reaching effects across the system’s colleges and the city’s schools. “When we pilot, it’s not just about looking at how something is benefiting one school,” says Andrea Soonachan, CUNY’s dean for K16 initiatives. “We look for initiatives that, though tested in limited settings, have the potential to succeed system-wide.”

Pilot pathway programs at CUNY are carefully designed to require minimal resources at the outset, enabling the system to test innovative ideas without significant financial risk. This approach also allows for adjustments based on real-time feedback and data-driven insights. By engaging various stakeholders —including students, faculty and administrative staff — in these pilots, CUNY can identify key factors and pain points early in the process.

The iterative process involves analyzing data, examining which roles were needed to carry out the program, and evaluating the specific challenges encountered during the pilot phases. Having such information from the start is instrumental in scaling up successful pilots efficiently and effectively. It ensures that when programs are expanded, they are poised for success. CUNY and New York City public school’s approach to nondegree credentials stand as an example of this approach.

## BUILDING AWARENESS AND OUTREACH

Even the most well-designed pathway programs will fall short of their potential impact if students are not aware of their existence. Consequently, many of the institutions discussed in this paper have adopted proactive outreach strategies. They maintain a consistent presence in local schools, frequently invite students to their campuses, and work closely with local teachers and administrators to cultivate early and meaningful connections between students and their institutions. Visibility and direct engagement are vital in ensuring that pathways are utilized effectively.

In Chicago, “Spotlight Days” have been instrumental in exposing students to potential career paths they can pursue through CCC. The events allow high school and middle school students to explore the specialized facilities and educational environments across the seven colleges within the CCC network. CCC also holds annual events every spring called Enrollment Days, in which high school students have the opportunity to register for classes and leave with their schedules already confirmed for the summer or fall term. Crucially, CCC and CPS work together to provide transportation and lunch for students engaging in these activities, removing a common barrier for many learners.

In New York, CUNY has implemented an outreach program that leverages more than 200 students to serve as paid college coaches, called “Bridge Coaches.” They undergo intensive training in critical areas such as financial aid, college applications, registration processes and immunization submissions. Because the Bridge Coaches closely reflect the demographics and ages



of the students they work with, they serve as near-peer mentors — communicating effectively with prospective students about complex topics and their backgrounds and experiences resonating with younger students in ways that other staff may not. The program has proven especially effective among non-native English speakers and students from low-income backgrounds — who are seven times more likely to enroll in college compared to their peers who do not engage with the coaches.



## NORTH CAROLINA A&T STATE UNIVERSITY: ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL OUTREACH

*North Carolina A&T State University*

Location: Greensboro, North Carolina

Enrollment: 13,800

The largest historically Black university in the country, North Carolina A&T State University spearheads several targeted outreach initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between high school and higher education. The university has developed a comprehensive approach to ensure its pathway programs — from dual enrollment to research apprenticeships for high schoolers — are not just widely available but actively penetrate the radar of prospective students in local K-12 schools.

One of the more innovative aspects of North Carolina A&T's outreach is the management of its own K-12 schools near or right on campus. These schools, a joint effort between the university and Guilford County Schools, are aimed at fostering early interest in higher education among students. North Carolina A&T hosts two high schools on its campus: an all-male academy and a co-educational

STEM early college program. The schools are integrated into the university environment, with high school students regularly attending classes alongside university students. By the time they graduate, students have gained significant exposure to university life, have earned up to two years of college credit, and have positioned themselves well ahead in their higher education journeys.

At the all-male high school, the Middle College at North Carolina A&T, 100% of students graduate and go on to pursue higher education. The university also offers a child development lab, providing hands-on experience to students pursuing early childhood education and high-quality child care for students and faculty. "We take Aggies all the way from pre-k to Ph.D.," says Nakeshia N. Williams, interim vice provost for undergraduate education at North Carolina A&T.

## STRATEGIC FINANCIAL INVESTMENTS IN PATHWAY SUCCESS

There's no denying that effective pathway programs, no matter how thoughtfully or frugally designed, require investment to support both success and sustainability. "There's always that question of cost," says Jay Perman, chancellor of the University System of Maryland. "Who's going to pay for these programs? How do we scale them?"

Unfortunately, the nature of human beings is instant gratification. When we talk about the fact that a program will result in more students walking across the graduation stage in ten years, people lose interest. We need to better demonstrate why it's important to be in this for the long haul."

CCC's program providing free college tuition to any student at the city's public high schools meeting certain academic requirements, for instance, is only possible through significant investment on the city's part. But the success of the program — called the Chicago Star Scholarship — underscores the impact that targeted financial support can have on increasing college accessibility and completion rates. This approach not only incentivizes academic excellence at the high school level but also alleviates financial barriers that often deter students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from pursuing higher education. About [18,000 students](#) have benefited from the program over the last decade.

But such investments should not be limited to scholarship programs; they should be complemented by resources aimed at smoothing the transition from high school to college, such as funding summer bridge programs, personalized counseling and [first-year experience courses](#) that are proven to not only boost enrollment but also retention and graduation rates.

## KEEPING IT LOCAL

Pathway programs can be particularly impactful when tailored to meet specific local needs, fostering direct connections between high schools and colleges and aligning with workforce demands to drive regional growth. This hyper-local approach, informed by a deep understanding of a community's challenges and strengthened by intentional collaboration with K-12 schools, community organizations and local businesses, allows pathway programs to create more targeted, sustainable solutions that benefit both students and the regional economy.

Sustained institutional commitment is essential, requiring investment of academic, financial, human and cultural resources into building reciprocal, place-based relationships.

DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, has developed pathway programs to address the state's low college-going rate. Just over half of Indiana's high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education. The DePauw program aims to foster a college-going culture among underrepresented students in rural and urban areas by providing early exposure to campus life, academic expectations, and critical resources like admissions and financial aid guidance. The program relies on partnerships with local, community-based organizations to bridge access gaps and inspire more Indiana students to pursue college.

Community-based organizations play a pivotal role in supporting pathway programs. In Baltimore, a collaborative effort between the Baltimore Ravens, M&T Bank, the Stephen and Renee Bisciotti Foundation, and Baltimore City Schools led to the creation of the Baltimore Ravens College Track Center. This initiative is designed to empower underserved students, helping them become the first in their families to achieve a bachelor's degree. The program also highlights how local K-12 districts can take the lead in developing and advancing pathway initiatives.

Pathway programs rooted in robust, hyper-local community collaboration ensure that higher education continues to serve as a powerful engine for social mobility and economic advancement.



## UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY: LEADING COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

*Utah Valley University*

Location: Orem, Utah

Enrollment: 44,600

Utah Valley University (UVU) is a dual-mission institution that serves as both a community college and four-year university. The university is deliberately structured this way in order to play a central role in advancing education and workforce readiness among the communities of the Mountainland region. UVU co-leads the K-16 Alliance, a collaboration with Mountainland Technical College and the region's K-12 providers. This partnership is designed to create seamless student pathways that address specific, critical workforce needs in the region.

The alliance is especially focused on math readiness. In 2014, just 10% of students entered Utah Valley having completed their initial college math requirement. By leveraging university resources to improve math education at the K-12 level, that number had risen to 28% by 2023. The impact of early math success is profound: UVU students who

complete their math requirement in their first year graduate at a rate of 64%, compared with just 28% for those who do not.

The alliance also supports a wide range of career-aligned pathways through articulation agreements and program alignment, spanning fields such as architecture, business, health care, law and manufacturing. The Mountainland Career and Technical Education program, for instance, provides students with access to more than 450 in-demand career pathways. In 2024, about 45,000 students participated in these pathways, earning more than 24,000 concurrent enrollment credits, 35,000 state-recognized skill certifications, and 2,400 third-party certifications in areas such as health science and welding.

By aligning its resources with local and regional partners, UVU demonstrates how collaboration can transform student success and drive economic growth in local communities.

## POLICY AT THE FEDERAL AND STATE LEVELS

Both federal and state policymakers must play a pivotal role in supporting the seamless transition from K-12 to and through postsecondary education. Perhaps most crucially, policymakers can provide greater funding to jump-start and sustain pathway initiatives.

At the federal level, investments should prioritize expanding access to high-quality work-based learning, dual enrollment and industry-recognized credentials. Policymakers should also fund comprehensive college and career advising systems that give high school students clear visibility into postsecondary and career opportunities. Additionally, federal policies should promote worker-centered and industry-driven workforce development, including skills training and apprenticeships.

At the state level, investments in professional development for educators and counselors, including training to equip teachers to deliver college-level courses and counselors to guide students along career pathways, are key. State policymakers can also facilitate the development of robust data systems and data-sharing agreements that track student progress from high school through college, enabling institutions to identify and support students at risk of falling behind.

Furthermore, states should encourage more affordable and accelerated postsecondary models, such as competency-based programs and stackable credentials, to meet the diverse needs of today's learners and workers. Stronger articulation agreements between high schools and postsecondary institutions should be mandated to ensure all credits are transferable and count toward degree completion. Establishing



competitive incentive grants can accelerate the development and expansion of pathway programs at local institutions.

Finally, federal and state policymakers should prioritize collaboration, working across jurisdictions, levels of government and sectors — as well as alongside experts in the field — to co-create best practices that establish coherent and robust pathways for students. Just as pathway programs aim to bridge the divide between high schools and colleges, the federal government can work to better align with state and local needs.



## CONCLUSION

The institutions featured in this paper illustrate that when pathways are thoughtfully designed and implemented, they can significantly enhance student outcomes by providing continuity, clarity and support throughout the student journey. Successful pathways are characterized by robust partnerships between educational institutions and supported by coherent policies at both the federal and state levels. They are driven by data and institutional collaboration, with top-down support and bottom-up leadership.

These growing efforts reflect a broader, necessary push to ensure that college truly

pays off for all students. We anticipate that the colleges and universities highlighted here — alongside many others working to build stronger connections between high school, postsecondary institutions and the workforce — will demonstrate improved access, higher completion rates and better earnings outcomes for the students they serve.

If we are intent on addressing educational and economic disparities, then regions, states and the federal government must incent, develop, refine and expand pathways programs. Such efforts are essential to reigniting faith in higher education and ensuring a more prosperous future for our country.

