

Postsecondary Workforce Alignment

A Framework for Program Design

Madeleine Sirois

One-third of CTE students are people of color and more than half are women.¹ Still, occupational segregation by race and gender is a strong structural barrier keeping learners from accessing high-value programs and good jobs.

Opportunities exist to better center students in program design by prioritizing equity and student outcomes.

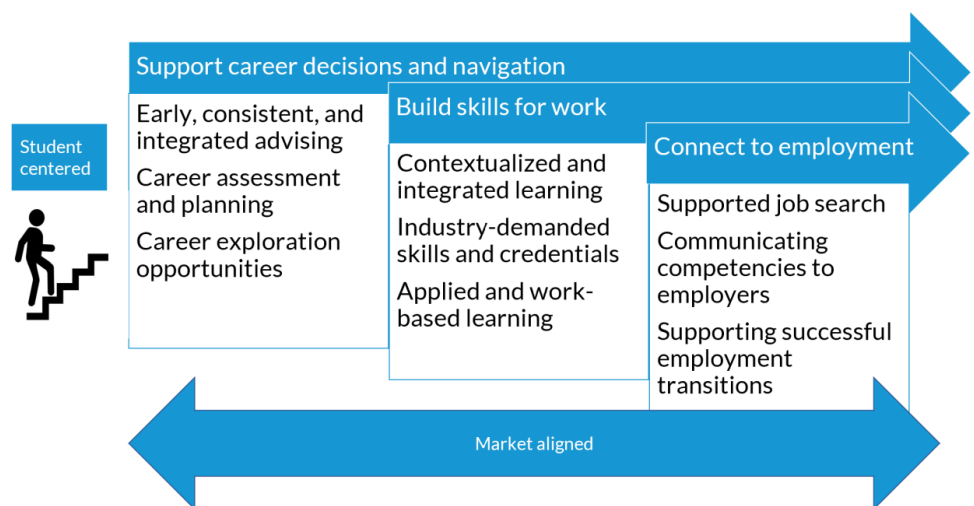
Employers can play many helpful roles in CTE programs, including **advising, capacity building, codesigning, convening advisory boards, and hiring students.** These strategies are associated with better job outcomes for students.²

Mean earnings two years after CTE program graduation are about **\$32,200** but range from around **\$15,000** to **\$60,000** for entry-level positions. Career counseling helps students navigate the many pathways and large variations in credential value.³

To deliver on the promise of postsecondary education, programs should be “workforce aligned,” meaning they are designed to help students meet their employment goals (including opportunities for economic security and mobility) and to help employers identify, hire, and retain talent. In particular, new majority learners face high barriers to pursuing postsecondary education and landing good jobs. Once considered “nontraditional,” new majority learners include students who are over the age of 24, have dependents, learn part time, work full time, have a low income, or belong to marginalized communities.

We developed a framework for workforce alignment in career and technical education (CTE). The framework has three key dimensions, which are **supporting career decisions and navigation, building skills for work, and connecting to employment.** Overarching goals include making sure programs are both student centered (designed with students’ needs and goals in mind) and market aligned (aligned with the needs of employers and labor market demand). Taken together, these dimensions define the key components and considerations for designing programs that help new majority learners get good jobs and thrive in their careers.

FIGURE 1
Workforce Alignment Framework



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Spaulding, Shayne, and Madeleine Sirois. 2022. “Designing Career and Technical Education Programs that Help Students Get Good Jobs.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

SUPPORT CAREER DECISIONS AND NAVIGATION

Early, consistent, and integrated counseling guides students along the steps to planning and achieving their long-term goals. Employers can contribute by directly advising students, but also by identifying skills and job prospects they should be aware of. Programs and employers can also provide early career exploration opportunities to help students choose their pathway. Ultimately, commitment to relationship building with students and improving early access to academic and career support appear to be hallmarks of successful programs (Sylvester and Myran 2018).

BUILD SKILLS FOR WORK

When programs and employer needs are not aligned, students often complete their credentials without having all the skills needed to gain an entry-level position in their chosen field. Program staff can work closely with employer partners to identify in-demand skills and develop curricula that best prepare students for successful employment. They can also collaborate to provide work-based learning opportunities, which develop skills in real-world settings and sometimes give students the chance to get their foot in the door with employers, leading to job opportunities.

CONNECT TO EMPLOYMENT

Students who face barriers to employment benefit when programs help them find and retain work. Programs can provide job search support to help them find good jobs that match their skills and preferences. Programs can also help students communicate their skills and credentials to employers, including in innovative ways such as microcredentials, e-portfolios, and learner records. By building strong relationships with employers—individually or through engagement in industry or sector partnerships—programs can support effective communication of skills and credentials, while also working to align programs with employer needs and improve the quality of jobs for workers.

ADDITIONAL READING

Workforce Alignment Study: Maximizing Workforce Success for College Students

Shayne Spaulding, Molly Scott, Nathan Sick, Amanda Briggs, Jincy Wilson, Madeleine Sirois, and Ryan Kelsey
<https://www.urban.org/projects/workforce-alignment-study>

Designing Career and Technical Education Programs that Help Students Get Good Jobs

Shayne Spaulding and Madeleine Sirois <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/designing-career-and-technical-education-programs-help-students-get-good-jobs>

NOTES

¹ Scott, Molly, Nathan Sick, and Jincy Wilson. 2022. *Getting the Most Out of Short-Term Career and Technical Education (CTE) Credentials: What Explains Differences in Debt and Earnings?* Washington, DC: Urban Institute

² Peck, Laura R., Schwartz, Deena, Strawn, Julie, Weiss, Christopher C., Juras, Randall, Mills de la Rosa, Siobhan, Greenstein, Nathan, Morris, Tori, Durham, Gabriel, & Lloyd, Charlotte. (2021). *A Meta-Analysis of 46 Career Pathways Impact Evaluations. Report prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office.* Rockville, MD: Abt Associates.
https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/A%20Meta-Analysis%20of%2046%20Career%20Pathways%20Impact%20Evaluations_final%20report.pdf

³ Scott, Molly, Nathan Sick, and Jincy Wilson. 2022. *Getting the Most Out of Short-Term Career and Technical Education (CTE) Credentials: What Explains Differences in Debt and Earnings?* Washington, DC: Urban Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeleine Sirois

msirois@urban.org

Madeleine Sirois is a Research Assistant in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute.