

Finding the Trailhead: Career Pathways Intake Design

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Our public education system and workforce training systems are predicated on linearity—that youth seamlessly transition from grade school to high school, to college then work. And it presupposes that once employed, adults climb a well-defined career ladder, with each rung offering progressively greater job responsibility and remuneration. Life is seldom so orderly.

People mature at different rates across different domains—spanning the physical, cognitive, and emotional. Economics, cultural and societal norms, and individuals’ unique life experiences exert additional influences. Though grouped into classrooms chronologically by age, it is the interplay of genetic and environmental factors that mediates when and how people mature. Consequently, some complete their formal education before they are ready for the responsibilities of adulthood. Adrift in life, lacking career goals and a plan, they make their way in the world—often under- or unemployed—until some internal or external force triggers an awakening.

What is it that causes a person to make a life change? For many, the motivation is economic. While the minimum wage may provide adequate financing to support a 19-year-old inhabiting his parent’s basement, it cannot sustain the lifestyle of an independent adult, particularly one with parenting responsibilities. For others, the decision is developmental. People achieve self-awareness at different ages, with some requiring “life seasoning” before they are ready or capable of pursuing a new path. And for still others the choice is experiential, with time on the job offering practical insights that help inform career investment alternatives.

Pathways for Change

Career pathways systems are intended to connect public education, workforce training, and social sector services to ease people’s transition into and out of postsecondary education/training and the workforce. Well-designed systems accommodate individuals’ life choices regardless of when and why those choices are made. Programs provide for entry and exit at multiple, clearly defined points on the academic/training ladder that lead to employment, with coursework aligned across education levels and indexed to labor market conditions. Standards, assessments, and credentials are sequenced and stacked to offer people career options and the flexibility to pursue training matched to their skills, experiences, and interests. And legislation and policies promote coordination, with funding braided across sources to ensure the efficient delivery of services.

To date, states’ pathway-building efforts primarily have been directed towards interlacing services offered by education and training providers, aligning program governance and administrative policies, and leveraging resources to create a cohesive, aligned, and sustainable system. Attention also has been directed towards retaining those who enroll. Following intake, youth and adults require educational

supports to help them identify a training goal, select a program and coursework that will enable them to earn a degree or industry-recognized credential, and find and retain work.

Finding the Trailhead—Youth

A comprehensive career pathways system offers youth an awareness of the world of work starting early in life, with career preparation integrated at every grade level. A comprehensive and aligned career development process should resemble the following:

- *Grades K–5—Career Awareness Stage:* Pre-adolescents are sensitized to the value of work and an awareness of the differing jobs that exist. This gradual introduction exposes youth to a range of careers—beyond that of firefighter—to help them understand the many paths they may follow as they move through life.
- *Grades 6–7—Initial Career Exploration:* Students begin exploring careers through project-based work and the integration of technical and employability skills in the academic curriculum. Field trips, career fairs, and classroom visits by workforce professionals may be used to help students discover their work interests.
- *Grade 8 Career Exploration and Transition:* As they prepare for their transition to high school, students are ready for more directed, albeit generalized career experiences. Development experiences begin to funnel students' interests within one or more industry contexts (i.e., "I want to do something in health care... Not sure what... but I am really interested in the field"), which may be accomplished through the creation of graduation plans based upon students' personal interests within broad cluster areas.
- *Grades 9–12 Programs of Study Related to a Career Goal:* Students are offered options to pursue a sequenced course of study, with progressively more advanced coursework aligned with their career goals. Program standards, curriculum, and assessments are aligned with college entry requirements and are industry-recognized, preserving students' options while readying them for postsecondary education and employment.

Regardless of grade level, classroom curriculum draws on real-world job examples to reinforce the career development process, with work-based learning experiences (e.g., field trips, career fairs, job shadowing, internships) offered, as appropriate, to help students make informed career training decisions.

Finding the Trailhead—Adults

Career pathways can serve as an instrument of mobility for those with the desire to advance in their careers. Unfortunately, the people most in need of skill upgrading are often those for whom education failed at the outset. Burned once by the system, these individuals may be unlikely to consider returning for schooling given their past negative associations. Pathways also can benefit incumbent workers who, though gainfully employed, may wish to upgrade their skills to take on greater work responsibilities.

Creating trailheads is the process of establishing points of entry to a career pathway. While an individuals' journey towards self-awareness is beyond most educators' control, once a life-changing decision is reached, pathways should provide a means of engagement. This speaks to the need for delineating multiple, clearly-defined points of entry along each career pathway, with entry requirements and supports designed to accommodate those with differing educational abilities and personal needs.

Often, a person's academic or employability skills are not at the level to even enter at a trailhead. When that is the case, "Bridge Programs" can be developed to bring the adult learner up to the skill level needed to embark on their journey.

The *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* calls for organizing career services for adults into three broad categories: basic career services available for all participants in a one-stop delivery system; individualized career services to help program-eligible participants succeed within their pathways; and follow-up career services to help individuals find and retain employment. These supports may be offered through a variety of means, ranging from case management, career advising, and assistance for individuals negotiating the complexities of a pathways system to academic and life support assistance, to retain individuals once enrolled.¹ This lattice of supports help ensure that, upon engagement, individuals persist in their studies and progress towards a positive result.

Ultimately, outreach is about advertising. People need to know the options available and where to go to obtain services. Since people have differing means of processing information and differing access to technology, information should be shared in a range of ways. Trailhead options should be disseminated in both digital and print, with video and social media tailored to different audiences. Materials also should be tailored for those with special needs, such as the deaf or visually impaired, to ensure broad coverage.

Outreach coordinators should be proactive in their engagement. Communications should be posted not just at traditional points of entry, for example at a community college admissions office, but also at places where people with skill deficits are likely to congregate, such as state unemployment or social service offices. Information may also be provided as inserts within other social service communications, such as mailings associated with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). And briefing materials should be developed to create emissaries of those likely to encounter potential pathways clients, such as social workers, clerics, and parole officers. While much of this messaging may be ignored at the outset, over time and with repeated exposure, people will eventually find their way to a trailhead.

Creating a seamless pathways architecture is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for career mobility. No matter how well blazed the trail, people must first find their way to an on-ramp to begin their development. Without thoughtful attention to trailhead design, there is a danger that career pathways systems, no matter how well formulated, will remain hidden from those ready—and most in need—of beginning a journey.

¹ The [Career Pathways Toolkit: An Enhanced Guide and Workbook for System Development](#), developed by the U.S. Department of Labor, offers detailed descriptions of these support services. See *Element Three: Design Education and Training Program*.