



Reimagining College and Career Transitions under COVID-19

How to expand the range of options for postsecondary students and drive larger-scale systems change over the next few years

About This Document: The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic recession magnify the visibility and consequences of the longstanding disconnect between a high school education and postsecondary and career opportunities. The United States has never had a system that helps all (or even most) students bridge the gap between high school graduation and further learning and employment. There is an urgent need to improve supports for postsecondary transitions over the next two to three years. This paper aims to expand ways to leverage philanthropy's collective networks, knowledge, and experience to address the immediate crisis and lay the groundwork for a system of transitions from high school to postsecondary education and careers for millions of young Americans.

A Vision Paper From



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I. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic recession have the potential to leave a devastating mark on the high school classes of 2020 and 2021. The pandemic has disrupted their learning in the crucial final years of high school and upended college plans for many: one in five graduating seniors are reconsidering their college plans in light of the public health and economic consequences of COVID-19. At the same time, students are graduating into the worst economy since the Great Depression, which significantly damages their career prospects. Research shows that individuals who entered the labor market in prior recessions experienced long-term earnings and employment gaps. The risks are even more acute for Black and Latinx youths and other underserved minorities, who are already at a disadvantage in terms of college-going rates and earnings. About 30 percent of Black workers and 20 percent of Latinx workers hold bachelor's degrees, compared with 44 percent of white workers. Moreover, in the last quarter of 2019, the median earnings of white workers were 28 percent higher than those of Black workers and more than 35 percent higher than those of Latinx workers. All available evidence suggests that these young people's experiences over the next two years could have a decades-long impact on both their futures and the economy.

The current crisis magnifies the visibility and consequences of the longstanding disconnect between a high school education and postsecondary and career opportunities. The United States has never had a system that helps all (or even most) students bridge the gap between high school graduation and further learning and employment. That's partly because a high school degree for decades was a ticket to the middle class. Now, however, to ensure that the future of recent and soon-to-be high school graduates remains bright, there is an urgent need to improve supports for postsecondary transitions over the next two to three years — and ideally, we can leverage the crisis to transform high school graduation into a launching pad rather than a cliff.

Some state, local, and philanthropic leaders are already exploring and advancing interventions along these lines. But understandably, most efforts are still relatively small-scale and do not yet benefit from connections to one another or to a framework for program excellence or systems change. Examples of these efforts include:

- tracking outcomes data for recent high school graduates and supporting their transitions by expanding high school models aligned with postsecondary pathways;
- strengthening advising and guidance related to college and career pathways;
- developing summer bridge and employment programs;
- blending late high school and early postsecondary programming, including 13th grade, dual enrollment, and early college models;
- expanding service corps (including those that address challenges related to COVID-19) with links to credentials and degrees; and
- establishing career pathways that connect high school to relevant degrees and credentials in high-growth fields or those that are likely to experience growth as the economy recovers.

Not only do these efforts expand the range of options for students in this critical period, but done right, they can also drive larger-scale systems change over the next few years.

II. A Role for Expanded Philanthropic Collaboration

Many of us are engaged in important, individual efforts related to postsecondary transitions — and there is some communication and collaboration beginning to emerge, including through our COVID-19 higher education working group. Interviews with thought leaders and practitioners have surfaced some actionable ideas for expanding communication and collaboration among foundations to address these challenges, as described below.

These ideas could be taken up by our COVID-19 higher education working group and involve any interested current or new members. Our collective activities could accelerate efforts — via incentives, support, and capacity building for states, cities, and nonprofit leaders — to increase the number of youth in the classes of 2020 and 2021 in quality postsecondary programs and pathways over the next 15 months and advance long-term systems change. (This model could also be broadened to include a greater range of substantive work.)

Short-Term Activities

A short-term aim is to fund ready-to-go projects. Participating foundations can discuss possible coinvestments in near-term demonstration projects focused on supporting students in the classes of 2020 and 2021 and indicate which projects they would like to recommend or discuss — and which category of program they would like to hear more about. We can prioritize agendas based on these requests and preferences.

Meanwhile, interested foundations would shape and agree on a framework and criteria (a draft of which is in Section V) to guide discussions by program area to drive impact and build the evidence base for larger-scale systems change. This framework would inform coinvestment discussions and learning opportunities in the working group. Funding could support demonstration projects as well as evaluation, planning, peer learning, and communications projects. Participating foundations would actively consider making at least one grant benefiting at least one target state or city. Options might include a demonstration grant, planning grant, multisite evaluation, or support of a learning community. As we complete the framework and develop quality criteria, priority will be given to projects in states or districts/cities intending to track, publicly report, and advance post-high school outcomes for graduating high school seniors — with an interest in citywide and statewide strategies in 2021 and beyond.

Longer-Term Projects

A subset of foundations could support longer-term systemic impact by investing in a small backbone or hub for the next 12 months that would network participating states, cities, and programs; capture learnings from demonstration projects; map those projects against a detailed framework for a redesigned system; identify gaps and opportunities to fill in missing pieces of the system, both nationally and within states; and crowdsource potential programs and solutions.

We look forward to your feedback on these options and next steps. Our aim is to expand ways to leverage our collective networks, knowledge, and experience to address our immediate crisis and lay the groundwork for a system of transitions from high school to postsecondary education and careers for millions of young Americans.

III. Funding Opportunities

A wide range of demonstration grants could focus at least partly on postsecondary transitions for the classes of 2020 and 2021. We are interested in getting recommendations from participating foundations. Below are some projects that have come our way in recent weeks.

Initial Demonstration Projects

Blending Late High School and Early Postsecondary Pathways

Projects in this area link the last two years of high school to postsecondary pathways to create on-ramps to college and careers. Models include expanded 13th grade, dual enrollment, and early college programs. For example:

- Blueprint for Maryland's Future would enable all students who meet college- and career-readiness standards in grade 10 to choose from a rich set of pathways during their last two years of high school, including early college programs, career and technical education leading to industry-valued credentials, and dual enrollment options.
- Northern Virginia Community College had more than 12,000 students in dual enrollment programs when schools shuttered because of COVID-19. The college created a Jumpstart program for 3,500 students in the classes of 2020 and 2021 to enable them to complete online courses that will count toward a degree while providing guidance on career pathways and FAFSA completion.

Expanding College and Career Advising and Bridge Programs

These initiatives scale advising, guidance, and bridge programs to maximize the percentage of high school graduates matriculating in college and earning credits or credentials in high-growth fields. They include summer and longer-term programs offered both in students' junior and senior years and after high school. For example:

- Dallas Commit, Nashville Better Together, and the City University of New York are implementing summer bridge programs that target interventions for the class of 2020.
- OneGoal, Propel, and others have designed curricula for college and career preparation that can be incorporated into one-semester or yearlong classes in high school.
- College Board, Common App, and College Advising Corps are offering virtual advising to students across the country, building on work and lessons learned from CollegePoint, which is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Expanding Service Corps

Initiatives in this area support programs that enable young people, including recent high school graduates, to solve vital national and community challenges while developing skills and earning postsecondary credits and credentials leading to valued degrees. For example:

- Chicago is looking to expand a summer youth service corps to a year-round opportunity for Black and Latinx youth from the South Side and West Side neighborhoods related to COVID-19. Participants

would engage in contact tracing, senior care, and a tutoring corps focused on learning loss and gain access to on-ramps to college and careers.

Developing Credential and Career Pathways

These efforts focus on developing high-quality, industry-valued credentials aligned with regional labor market demand and working with local higher education institutions to ensure those credentials count toward a degree. For example:

- Career Connect Washington aims to support 1,500–2,000 students in the high school class of 2020 in Washington State through career pathway programs leading to credentials and good jobs in fields such as advanced manufacturing, agricultural production, and data analysis and cloud computing.

Supplementary Grants: Planning, Evaluation, and Network Grants

To leverage and supplement the work of the demonstration projects, funders also could support planning, evaluation, or learning community grants. Grants could be made across all categories and could include deep dives into a particular category, such as national service. Examples include the following.

Short-Term Planning Grants

Grants could support 3–6 states and cities in planning activities aligned to the overall goal, including planning how to leverage federal stimulus money. Activities could include prioritizing areas of need and opportunity across the state, identifying strong partners, incentivizing and engaging students, filling data gaps, and preparing a “shovel-ready” implementation plan. To qualify, governors or mayors would need to prioritize and commit a top cabinet member or team member to lead with an outside partner. This would include plan elements such as those described for states and cities below.

Immediate Quick-Sprint Planning Grants

Grants could also aid selected nonprofit partners to adapt or scale their work to support state or city demonstration projects in one or more of the target locations. These grants could help nonprofits build capacity and plans to engage in this work. Efforts might focus on areas such as college advising (e.g., College Possible, OneGoal), career preparation and advising curricula (e.g., Propel), or national service (e.g., City Year, Service Year Alliance). They also might focus on tutoring or career credentials.

Peer-to-Peer Learning Grants

These grants would support selected organizations that can facilitate peer-to-peer learning around a core functional area (advising, career credentials, tutoring or service corps, redesigned upper years of high school). The learning community would enlist subject matter experts to help generate options, provide feedback, and support planning.

Research Grants

These grants would support world-class research organizations to design and implement rapid, high-quality evaluations to build a useful evidence base and support continuous improvement.

IV. Priority for Projects in High-Potential States and Cities

We would look especially closely at projects in states, cities, and districts that intend to:

- Track, publicly report, and advance post–high school outcomes for graduating seniors statewide and by high school.
- Develop a strategy and plan for statewide or citywide efforts by 2021.
- Support at least one demonstration project focused on reaching Black, Latinx, and low-income students while clarifying how the project would inform the planning and implementation of larger-scale systems-change approaches in 2021 and beyond. Strong evaluations would be a key element of this work.
- Match philanthropic grants with state or local funding (the CARES Act, future stimulus funding, or local philanthropy).

For example, in Dallas, Texas, local higher education institutions (~40 percent of high school enrollments) have agreed to use one app-based common enrollment checklist to make college matriculation easier. Through a summer bridge program, students will receive college and career advising and will be able to complete online NROC courses to demonstrate college readiness in English and math and enroll in credit-bearing courses.

Building on the Dallas pilot this summer, Texas plans to accelerate college and career readiness and enrollment statewide starting this school year for approximately 60,000 students. ApplyTexas will provide a simple enrollment checklist for all students at all college, university, and training partners in Texas. The state also plans to:

- set up a digital locker for every student to enable them to share career- and college-readiness information with colleges and employers;
- open access to NROC college-readiness courses in high school for students to demonstrate college readiness, as an alternative to high-stakes tests; and
- work with Texas OnCourse (Texas Education Agency division) to develop advisor and student modules focused on career advising and college affordability and financing, along with college match and fit tools.

This work will be funded by a demonstration grant to support the pilot in Dallas (\$250–500K) and a state planning grant and support (\$1M) to build out the statewide data system required for the digital lockers.

V. Draft Framework and Criteria

Designing a system to support students' post–high school transitions requires paying attention to each point in the process where potential leakages could occur and drawing on data to design effective interventions and supports. The potential areas for investment outlined below are focused on key transition points: redesigning the upper years of high school to link to postsecondary pathways; strengthening

outreach and advising for graduating seniors to ensure every student has a post-high school plan; developing summer jobs and bridge programs to address summer melt; expanding service corps to keep young people who are not going directly into college or the workforce on a pathway to college and careers while serving their communities; and developing or expanding career credentialing and pathway programs in high-growth fields to connect students with high-opportunity jobs in the shifting labor market. Incentive planning grants to states and cities could spur this agenda and help knit its elements together into a more coherent system.

Aligning High School and Postsecondary Pathways

Initiatives should focus on underserved students so that every student:

- *Completes a credit-bearing, action-oriented course to support college and career exploration, planning, and skills development.* We already have models of such courses, such as Propel's career exploration course and Noble Charter Schools' senior college seminar class.
- *Receives ongoing, high-quality advising focused on developing, monitoring, and executing an individual transition plan.* Models exist in high-performing charter management organizations and among high-performing college access and success organizations.
- *Gets a head start on their future by completing at least one high-quality online academic or career-related course leading to an industry-valued credential and meaningful college credit to accelerate degree attainment.* Many good examples already exist of early college high schools, dual enrollment programs, and short-term credentialing programs but none at scale.
- *Participates in a model that, in light of COVID-19 and its expected ongoing impact, flexibly combines online and in-person delivery.*

Expanding Student Outreach and College and Career Advising

Initiatives should:

- *Connect with each high school senior to verify and report their postgraduation plan — and identify students without a plan.*
- *Maximize college enrollment for seniors already admitted to college but at risk of not matriculating.*
 - Encourage institutes of higher education to extend their commitment deadline or to offer a second deadline.
 - Launch intensive outreach to enroll students, including advising and financial aid supports.
 - Provide opportunities for online credit recovery and college coursework this summer to provide a head start on college, maintain engagement, and reduce summer melt.
- *Use information about students' plans (or lack thereof) to identify and deploy interventions and programmatic opportunities to keep students on a path to postsecondary education and training or a good first job.*

Creating Robust Bridge Programs

Initiatives should:

- Include combinations of several types of opportunities:
 - virtual internships;
 - credentialing, potentially focused on nationally recognized information technology and health care skills;
 - skill development, potentially focused on digital literacy, career readiness, and professional or soft skills;
 - early college credit (or college remediation/readiness benchmark courses), potentially focused on bridge or transition courses, given learning loss due to school closures; and
 - COVID-19 recovery projects.
- *Provide stipends for youth.*
- *Support each participant to develop and implement a post-summer and postgraduation plan and track their outcomes so that all students have a verified, concrete plan.*

Expanding Service Corps for Youth and Linking National Service to College and Career Pathways

Initiatives should:

- *Focus new positions on education (e.g., virtual tutoring, teachers' aide roles) and COVID-19 contact tracing.*
- *Provide quality college and career advising to help corps members plan for their post-service lives.*
- *Expand access to higher education and career credentials for corps members.* Working with eligible higher education institutions (or funded partners of lead grantees), initiatives should ensure that each corps member completes degree-aligned coursework (including credit-bearing service experiences) or attains an industry-valued, stackable credential with full credit transfer.
- *Serve at least 50 percent first-year college students.* Institutions could include part-time students for a summer of service and part-time service during the school year. States could plan to extend initiatives statewide in future years.

Developing College and Career Pathways and Stackable Credentials in High-Opportunity Fields

Initiatives should:

- *Create transparency of performance for higher education and career credentialing by building out linked data systems*, including publishing lists of state-recognized credentials and using labor market data to identify high-growth fields.
- *Create incentives and requirements for two- and four-year institutions to accept stackable credentials*. Funds targeted toward community colleges can support them in building their online capacity and providing wraparound supports for students to complete online programming.
- *Remove policy and financial barriers* that keep high school students from earning credentials and taking credit-bearing courses.

Supporting State and City Planning to Improve Post-High School Transitions

A state or city plan might include:

- *developing a longitudinal data system* to track, report, and advance postsecondary education and employment outcomes for graduating high school seniors;
- *modifying high school graduation requirements* such that, for example, each student is required to have a verified landing spot, commit to working with an advisor postgraduation, or complete a quality college- and career-planning course;
- *leveraging postsecondary and K-12 funding* to support smooth transitions in grades 12 and 13, such as fast-track early-college funding for high school students or K-12 funding to support a 13th year for students to earn postsecondary credits and industry-valued credentials;
- *curating a set of high-quality credential programs* for educators and students with strong labor market outcomes for in-demand jobs and careers; and
- *providing incentives* for better transition outcomes through pay-for-success policies.



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