

# Alliance for Quality Career Pathways

## *How Practitioners Can Use Alliance Framework Version 1.0*

CLASP and the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways are pleased to share with you the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Framework Version 1.0. The career pathways movement is gaining momentum as frontline leaders like you and your colleagues build cross-agency partnerships to support both individual prosperity and regional economic competitiveness.

Career pathway work is expanding, along with an emerging body of evidence from national and state studies. However, we know that your ability to fully embrace the career pathway approach is hampered by the lack of a common, cross-agency understanding of what constitutes a quality career pathway system and metrics to assess participants' progress and success along the pathway. From you, we have learned that without cross-system consensus on the "right" things to adopt and implement, it is difficult to know if your partnership is on the right track.

In 2012, CLASP responded to this challenge by inviting 10 leading career pathway states—**Arkansas, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oregon, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin**—and their local/regional partners to form the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, which is supported by the Joyce Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, and Greater Twin Cities United Way. During Phase I of the initiative (2012-2014), these partners developed a framework, based on existing evidence and "wisdom from the field" from your peers across the country, which provides a shared vision and understanding of quality career pathway systems, pathways, and programs. The executive summary of the Alliance framework is enclosed and you can find the full framework at [www.clasp.org/careerpathways](http://www.clasp.org/careerpathways).

The Alliance's goal is to help state and local/regional partnerships strengthen their career pathway systems to help individuals in need access and succeed in education, training, and career pathway employment (particularly low-income and underprepared adults and youth), as well as to fill critical skill shortages in companies and regions. In some communities, the career pathway approach includes an explicit focus on reducing racial and ethnic disparities in education and employment—leading to increased diversity in employers' talent pipelines. Other communities have merged the sector strategy approach with a career pathway approach in order to meet the needs of both workers/job seekers and employers. Career pathways initiatives are changing systems and changing lives through the dedicated efforts of education and workforce development professionals.

With support from the Joyce Foundation, the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Phase II will focus on implementing the framework with a learning community of career pathway practitioners and building a base of collective knowledge (2014-2015). We invite you to join us in using the Alliance framework to strengthen your efforts.



Specifically, the framework can help practitioners involved in or exploring career pathways by:

- Defining a comprehensive three-part framework—(1) career pathway definitions and conceptual model; (2) system criteria and indicators; and (3) career pathway participant metrics—that you can use to build and continuously improve career pathway systems (which the Alliance defines as the partnerships, policies, resources and funding, and data/metrics that support career pathways and programs).
- Providing a consistent, transparent, and shared understanding of the features and functions essential to quality career pathways and systems (based on our current understanding).
- Pilot testing the Alliance career pathway participant metrics to develop a data-driven continuous improvement process for your career pathways.
- Detailing a framework to use in formative evaluations of career pathway systems to add to the field's knowledge base of what works and what doesn't.

Thank you for your support of career pathways and the individuals who need them to attain credentials and secure good jobs to support themselves and their families. We welcome your thoughts and ideas for using the Alliance framework to strengthen efforts toward our shared goals.



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# SHARED VISION, STRONG SYSTEMS

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**Alliance for Quality  
Career Pathways**

a project of CLASP

Framework Version 1.0  
Executive Summary

# Shared Vision, Strong Systems:

## *The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Framework Version 1.0 Executive Summary*

### **What is the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways?**

The Alliance, or AQCP, is a partner-driven, CLASP-led initiative funded by the Joyce Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Greater Twin Cities United Way. The Alliance's goal is to help state and local/regional partnerships strengthen their career pathway systems.

In 2012, CLASP invited 10 leading career pathway states—**Arkansas, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oregon, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin**—to join Phase I of the Alliance (2012-2014). CLASP and the Alliance partners jointly developed and provided consensus support for the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Framework 1.0, which establishes a common understanding of quality career pathways and systems.<sup>1</sup>

The Alliance framework\* provides a clear set of criteria and indicators for what constitutes a quality state and local/regional career pathway system, as well as metrics to assess participant progress and success. The framework is designed to help career pathway partners continuously improve their systems. It also can serve as a collaborative, comprehensive strategy for policymakers and funders to align and enhance their investments, technical assistance, and guidance for building, scaling, and sustaining career pathway systems. In Phase II (2014-2015), the Alliance will focus on implementing the framework and sharing lessons with the field.

**What is Different About the Career Pathway Approach?** It is a paradigm shift in how we prepare people for work and lifelong learning. It reorients existing education and workforce services from myriad disconnected programs to a structure that focuses on the workforce needs of employers and on

The *career pathway approach* connects progressive levels of education, training, support services, and credentials for specific occupations in a way that optimizes the progress and success of individuals with varying levels of abilities and needs. This approach helps individuals earn marketable credentials, engage in further education and employment, and achieve economic success. Career pathways deeply engage employers and help meet their workforce needs; they also help states and communities strengthen their workforces and economies.

*Career pathways* operationalize the career pathway approach and include three essential features and four functions (see pages 2-3 below).

individuals in need of education and training to be successful on their career paths. This approach focuses on systems change to provide clear transitions, strong supports, and other elements critical to the success of participants. When implemented fully, service providers align their programs and services, employers and industry representatives deeply engage, and participants seamlessly earn credentials and access career-focused employment. In some communities, the career pathway approach includes an explicit focus on reducing racial and ethnic disparities in education and employment while at the same time increasing diversity in employers' talent pipelines. Still other communities have merged the sector strategy approach with a career pathway approach in order to meet the needs of both workers/job seekers and employers.

\* Learn more about the Alliance, access the complete 1.0 Framework, and request the companion self-assessment tools at [www.clasp.org/careerpathways](http://www.clasp.org/careerpathways). To join the conversation on Twitter, use #AQCPPathways.

**Why Do We Need Career Pathways?** The career pathway approach is not simply a new model; it is a new way of doing business. And a new way of doing business is necessary to make any significant progress on the daunting education and skill challenges we face as a nation, including: tens of millions of adults with skills too low to succeed in education or work; millions of youth who are disconnected from school and work and who face a dire future without better opportunities; poor and worsening college completion and credential attainment rates; and our persistent challenge in meeting employers' need for skilled workers. Today's education and workforce development systems were designed for different times when credentials were not required for nearly two-thirds of jobs and lifelong learning was typically avocational—not a key ingredient to individual economic security and global competitiveness. These systems were not built to provide all workers with seamless pathways and, despite good intentions, have shortcomings and disconnects that often block the road to educational and economic success.

The career pathway approach is increasingly gaining momentum. More than a dozen states have adopted it, and many more are eagerly exploring implementation. Public and private funders have supported the career pathway approach through numerous initiatives that include financial investments, technical assistance, regulatory guidance, and evaluations from the federal departments of education, health and human services, labor, and transportation.<sup>ii</sup> Foundation-funded supportive efforts include the Ford Foundation's *Bridges to Opportunity*, the Joyce Foundation's *Shifting Gears*, and the multi-funder *Breaking Through* and *Accelerating Opportunity* initiatives.

## Alliance Definitions & Conceptual Model

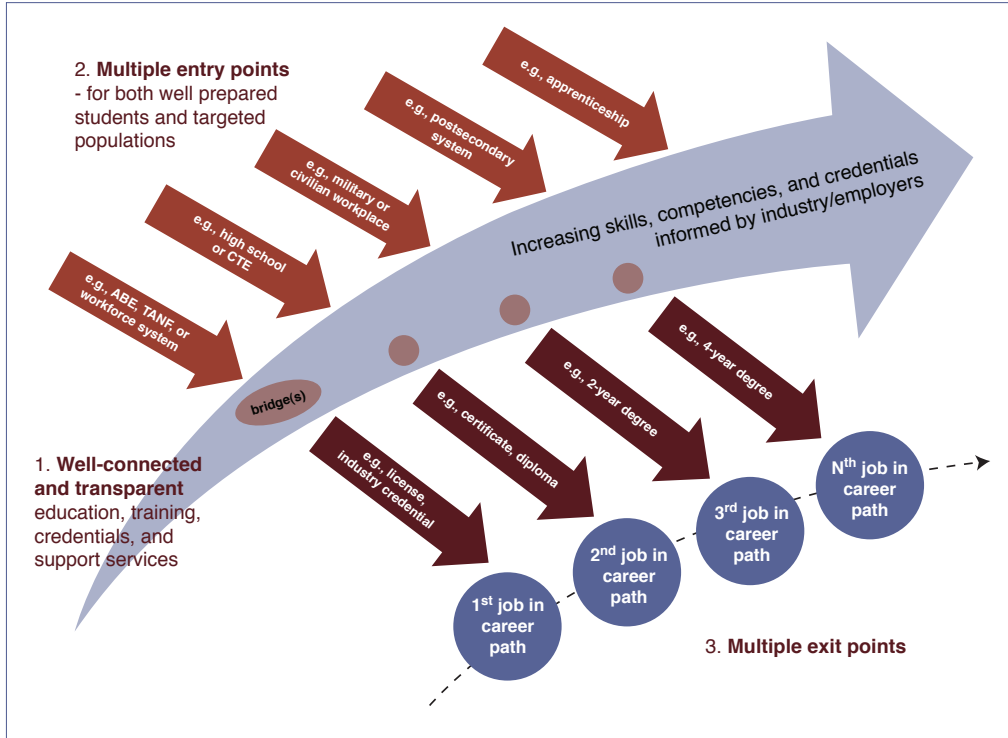
The **career pathway approach** connects progressive levels of education, training, support services, and credentials for specific occupations in a way that optimizes the progress and success of individuals with varying levels of abilities and needs. This approach helps individuals earn marketable credentials, engage in further education and employment, and achieve economic success. Career pathways deeply engage employers and help meet their workforce needs; they also help states and communities strengthen their

workforces and economies. This approach is not simply a new model; it is a way to transform systems.

The career pathway approach can benefit a wide variety of participants, including those who are younger or older, traditional or nontraditional, and on an academic or occupational path. This approach is especially beneficial for more vulnerable populations, whose educational and career success is more often impeded by disconnects between systems and limited access to integrated services. **Career pathways** operationalize the career pathway approach and include three essential features and four functions (see figures 1 and 2 below). The essential features include:

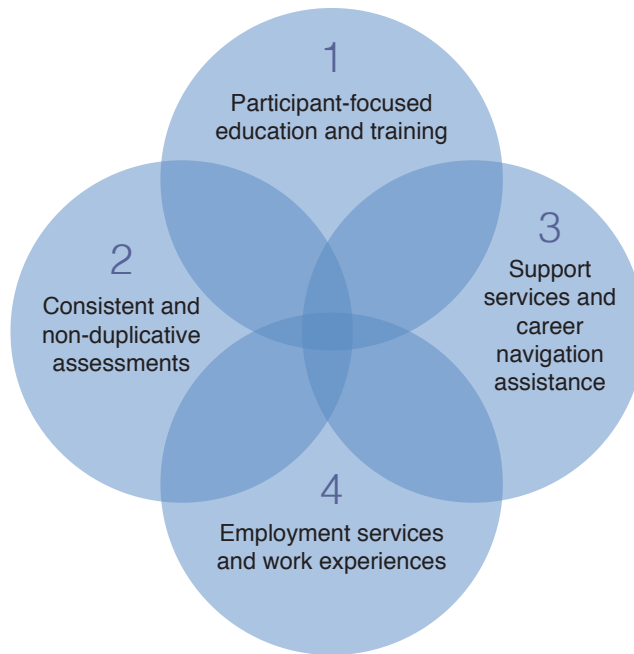
- 1) **Well-connected and transparent** education, training, support services, and credentials within specific sectors or cross-sector occupations (often delivered via multiple linked and aligned programs).
- 2) **Multiple entry points** that enable well-prepared students, as well as targeted populations with limited education, skills, English, and work experiences, to successfully enter the career pathway. Targeted populations served by career pathways may include adult education or other lower-skilled adult students, English Language learners, offenders or ex-offenders, high school students, disconnected or “opportunity” youth, some former military personnel, un- or under-employed adults, or others.
- 3) **Multiple exit points** at successively higher levels that lead to self- or family-supporting employment and are aligned with subsequent entry points.

Figure 1: Three Essential Features of Career Pathways



The four essential functions of career pathways—and any programs linked and aligned within the pathway—include:

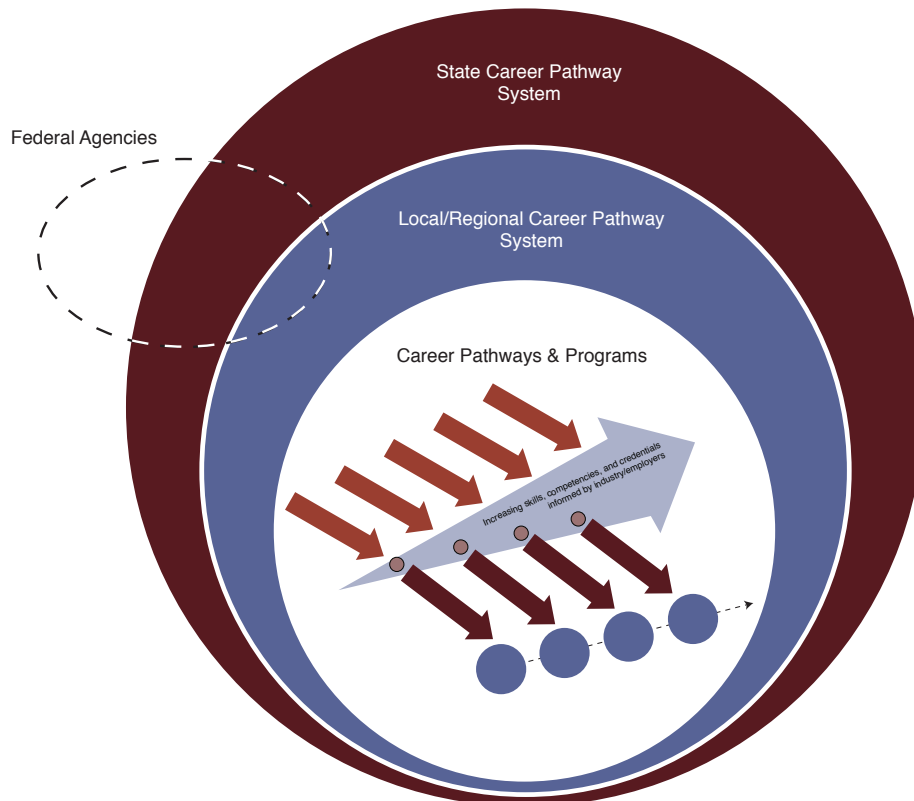
Figure 2: Four Essential Functions of Career Pathways and Programs



Career pathways and programs are at the “heart” of and ideally are supported by strong career pathway systems, as well as a “feedback loop” between state career pathway systems, local/regional systems, and federal agencies (see figure 3 below). A **career pathway system** is the cohesive combination of partnerships, resources and funding, policies, data, and shared performance measures that support the development, quality, scaling, and “dynamic

sustainability”<sup>iii</sup> of career pathways and programs for youth and adults. A career pathway system is an overarching framework and is not couched within any one public education, workforce, or other system; however, one of these systems may take the lead on developing the career pathway partnership. The value of a career pathway system is that it connects and aligns all other related public systems to one another and to private and nonprofit partners.

Figure 3: Career Pathway System



## Alliance Criteria and Indicators for Quality Career Pathway Systems

A quality career pathway system is one that *performs well* as measured by how many targeted participants achieve expected outcomes (see next section on participant metrics). Additionally, quality systems *intentionally operate like a system*, provide services and achieve outcomes *at scale*, and are *sustainable* over time. Based on currently available evidence and their wealth of wisdom from the field, the Alliance partners agree that the following criteria and indicators can be used by career pathway partners to assess the quality of and continuously improve their career pathway systems.<sup>iv</sup> With the exception of criterion 6, all of these criteria and indicators are applicable to both state and local/regional career pathway partnerships.<sup>v</sup>

**CRITERION 1: COMMIT TO A SHARED VISION AND STRATEGY** for industry sector-based career pathways for youth and adults and for building, scaling, and dynamically sustaining career pathway systems.

**Summary of Indicators** include: Public, private, and nonprofit partners build and maintain a system that supports the essential features and functions of quality career pathways and programs; adopt a shared strategy and commit their agencies/organizations to carrying out specific roles and responsibilities; embed shared definition of career pathway approach and key related concepts into their own strategic plans and policies.

**CRITERION 2: ENGAGE EMPLOYERS AND INTEGRATE SECTOR STRATEGY PRINCIPLES** to ensure multiple employers, business associations, and labor unions are partners in creating demand-driven career pathways.

**Summary of Indicators:** Employer, business associations, and/or labor partners make demonstrated investment in building, scaling, and sustaining the career pathway system; labor market intelligence informs development and ongoing relevance of career pathways; partners integrate sector strategy principles including a focus on regional in-demand occupations, focus on “dual customers” of workers/job seekers and employers, system change and alignment, and engaging multiple employers.

**CRITERION 3: COLLABORATE TO MAKE RESOURCES AVAILABLE** by identifying, prioritizing, and leveraging resources for career pathway systems, partnerships, and programs.

**Summary of Indicators:** Designated staff convene and support the career pathway system with adequate human and technology capacity; partners make available necessary resources, tools, infrastructure, and time to support practitioners in providing the essential features and functions of career pathways and programs; partners leverage and coordinate existing and new federal, state, and/or private/philanthropic resources.

**CRITERION 4: IMPLEMENT SUPPORTIVE POLICIES** for career pathway systems, pathways, and programs.

**Summary of Indicators:** Partners provide clear and consistent guidance on cross-system alignment and the allowable use of resources to support career pathways; partners adjust existing or adopt/implement new policies and internal structures to remove barriers and to facilitate the development and implementation of career pathway systems, pathways, and programs.

**CRITERION 5: USE DATA AND SHARED MEASURES** to measure, demonstrate, and improve participant outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

**Summary of Indicators:** Partners develop their capacity and provide data to support the use of longitudinal cross-system data, including data collected by community-based career pathway programs as well as educational institutions; partners evaluate how well the career pathway system is performing and support continuous improvement efforts.

**CRITERION 6: IMPLEMENT AND INTEGRATE EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES AND PROCESSES** (specifically for regional/local career pathway systems).

**Summary of Indicators:** Partners engage in continuous improvement process in order to develop and integrate a set of evidence-based practices and processes that optimize career pathway participant success; partners provide and measure the effectiveness of the essential features and functions of career pathways (see section on definitions and conceptual model).



## Alliance Career Pathway Participant Metrics

**Why Do We Need Career Pathway Metrics?** The purpose of the Alliance participant metrics is to provide a shared set of outcome metrics that can be used jointly by partners to measure career pathway participant progress and success. These metrics differ from existing measures in that they: (a) focus specifically on the performance of career pathways—not on state-level or institutional-focused performance results; (b) measure participant outcomes in the context of career pathway progression as opposed to the source of the funds (career pathways often “braid” together multiple sources of funds); and (c) include “milestone” metrics to measure the progress of and provide credit for serving underprepared participants.

**When Should Career Pathway Metrics Be Used?** A prerequisite for using the Alliance participant metrics is a suite of well-developed career pathways that have fully established the three essential features (see section above on Alliance definitions and conceptual model). Also, partners will need access to the necessary data and to aligned data systems that use consistent terms and definitions. Since these prerequisites are still under development in many career pathway systems, the Alliance participant metrics will be piloted in Phase II of the initiative (see the full framework for a more detailed discussion).

***CLASP and the Alliance partners discourage funders and policymakers from using these metrics for performance accountability until these prerequisites are in place; until that time, they should be used only to provide technical assistance to help partners improve their career pathways and systems.***

**Which Participants Should Be Measured?** Before using career pathway participant metrics, partners must make a major decision: which participants should be included in each metric? Self-selected Alliance partners that meet the prerequisites will pilot the following definitions in Phase II of the Alliance:

1) ***Career pathway participant:*** An individual who has enrolled in and is attending specific courses or activities or is receiving services (or combinations thereof) that have been designated as specific entry points for a career pathway.

2) ***Career pathway leaver:*** A career pathway participant who is no longer enrolled in pathway courses, services, or activities and has not reenrolled in pathway courses, services, or activities for a period of at least one year. Career pathway leavers include:

- a. participants who attained one or more of the interim outcomes (group A below) or pathway education and training outcomes (group B below) attainable in a career pathway prior to leaving the pathway; and
- b. participants who did not attain one of these interim or pathway outcomes prior to leaving the pathway.

3) ***Career pathway credential completer:*** A career pathway participant who attained one or more of the pathway education and training outcomes (group B below) attainable in a career pathway prior to leaving the pathway. These outcomes include marketable credentials as designated by the local/regional career pathway partnership, such as a license, industry certification, certificate, diploma, or degree. Career pathway credential completers include:

- a. participants who have left the career pathway after attaining one of the above credentials; and
- b. participants who are still enrolled in career pathway courses after attaining one of the above credentials, with the goal of attaining *further* credentials.

**Proposed Alliance Career Pathway Participant Metrics.** The Alliance menu of metrics includes three types of measures. Partners must map the appropriate metrics to specific career pathways; not all metrics will be used in all career pathways.

## Group A: Interim Outcomes

Identify important progress steps or momentum points along the career pathway that may be attained prior to the pathway's final outcomes.

- A.1. Educational level gains
- A.2. High school diploma or equivalency attainment
- A.3. Developmental/remedial education completion
- A.4. College-level pathway course completion
- A.5. College-level math or English course completion
- A.6. Retention in pathway coursework in subsequent term
- A.7. Pathway credit accumulation 1 (12 semester or 15 quarter college credits)
- A.8. Pathway credit accumulation 2 (24 semester or 30 quarter college credits)
- A.9. Earnings progression

## Group B: Education and Training Outcomes (Along the Pathway)

Identify the primary education and training results for the career pathway, including licenses and industry credentials, certificates, diplomas, and degrees.

- B.1. Pathway license, industry certification, or apprenticeship certificate attainment
- B.2. Pathway certificate and diploma attainment
- B.3. Pathway Associate degree attainment
- B.4. Pathway Associate degree attainment or transfer to 2- or 4-year institution

In general, the metrics in Groups A and B would apply to career pathway participants who attain one of these outcomes or who left the career pathway prior to attaining one of these outcomes.

## Group C: Labor Market Outcomes

Identify the primary labor market results for the career pathway to measure the progression in employment and earnings over time for participants.

- C.1. Initial employment
- C.2. Employment in targeted industry sector
- C.3. Subsequent employment retention
- C.4. Initial earnings
- C.5. Earnings change
- C.6. Subsequent earnings

In general, the Group C metrics would apply to career pathway participants once they left the career pathway (became career pathway leavers).

## Next Steps

With anchor funding from the Joyce Foundation, the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways will continue into Phase II through 2015. In this phase, Alliance partners at the state and local/regional levels will implement the framework by self-assessing their career pathway systems to better understand strengths and areas for improvement. Alliance partners will also make progress on using the participant metrics in their systems. CLASP will share learnings with the field. For more information on the Alliance and the 1.0 Framework, see [www.clasp.org/careerpathways](http://www.clasp.org/careerpathways).

- <sup>i</sup> The Alliance 1.0 Framework also has been informed by a National Advisory Group, which includes the following individuals: **Judy Alamprese** and **Karen Gardiner**, Abt Associates; **Debra Bragg**, Office of Community College Research and Leadership; **Mary Clagett**, Jobs for the Future; **Kim Green**, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium; **Gary Hoachlander**, ConnectEd California; **Lennox McLendon**, National Council of State Directors for Adult Education; **Israel Mendoza**, Consultant; **Darlene Miller**, National Council for Workforce Education; **Deborah Mills**, Center for Occupational Research and Development; **Nan Poppe**, Consultant; **Ann Randazzo** and **Valerie Taylor**, Center for Energy Workforce Development; **Brandon Roberts**, Working Poor Families Project; **Bob Sheets**, Consultant; and **Mala Thakur**, National Youth Employment Coalition. **Eric Seleznow**, currently the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration, served on the National Advisory Group in his former position as State Policy Director at the National Skills Coalition.
- <sup>ii</sup> Federal investments include but are not limited to the Department of Labor’s 2010-2011 Career Pathways Institute and Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants; the Department of Education’s *Advancing Career and Technical Education in State and Local Career Pathway Systems*, *Technical Assistance to Build State Career Pathway Systems*, and Experimental Sites Initiative to test Pell grants for shorter-term training; and the Department of Health and Human Services’ *Health Professions Opportunity Grants* and *Innovative Strategies to Improve Self-Sufficiency*. Supportive federal guidance includes the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education’s guidance on using adult education funds to support integrated education and training and the 2012 joint letter of commitment to career pathways from the departments of education, health and human services, and labor.
- <sup>iii</sup> “Dynamic sustainability” means not only continuing the career pathways, programs, and system beyond initial development but also supporting their adaptation and continuous improvement over time based on experience, new information, data, and outcomes. In some cases, it may mean discontinuing career pathways and programs that are no longer in demand.
- <sup>iv</sup> This executive summary includes a summary of the indicators; see the [full Alliance framework](#) for the specific indicators.
- <sup>v</sup> The Alliance framework is aligned with the federal *Six Key Elements of Career Pathways* framework. *Six Key Elements* provides steps career pathway partners can take to begin building a career pathway system; the Alliance framework provides key performance indicators partners can use in a continuous improvement review.
- <sup>vi</sup> This criterion and the indicators build on and are consistent with the Workforce Data Quality Campaign’s (WDQC) policy agenda: see <http://www.workforcedqc.org/resources-events/resources/wdqc-policy-agenda>. CLASP is one of the national partners in the WDQC.



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