

COMPLETE TO COMPETE

Improving Postsecondary Attainment Among Adults

Training



Degree



Graduate



Careers

2010 - 2011

National Governors Association Chair's Initiative

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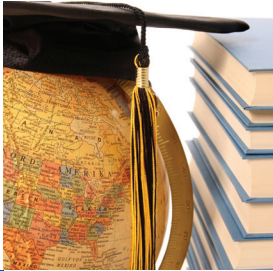
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. labor market is increasingly demanding a more educated workforce. Of the 48 million job openings projected for the next eight years, 63 percent will require some postsecondary education.¹ For many of these job openings, workers will need at least a high school diploma but not necessarily a four-year degree.

Occupations that once could sustain workers with no more than a high school diploma in a middle-class lifestyle now require individuals to have some postsecondary education, including two- and four-year degrees, certifications, and other industry-recognized credentials. This trend will continue as more industries demand specific skills and knowledge of their workers to compete effectively in a global and technology-based economy. Although more jobs today require some postsecondary education, the United States is greatly underprepared to meet this need. Only approximately 42 percent of the current workforce has an associate or higher-level degree, resulting in a potentially large skills gap. To meet future labor market demands, by 2018 the nation will have to increase the number of individuals pursuing a postsecondary degree or credential above the current level by 3 million.²

To successfully increase the proportion of postsecondary degree or certificate holders in the United States, the focus must be on *adult* learners.* Demographic shifts, including the aging of baby boomers and a smaller, less-educated younger generation, dictate that the only way to meet future workforce demands is to increase the education level of today's adults. The number of younger individuals continuing their education past high school is insufficient to fill the impending skills gap, potentially leading to a decline in economic competitiveness for states and the nation.³

Meeting the education and training needs of the future via investments in adult learners is not a simple task. Numerous challenges exist for adults wanting to increase their education and skills. Approximately 88 million adults in the United States have at least one major barrier to success in the labor market, such as failure to attain a high school diploma, no postsecondary degree or training, or inability to speak, read, and write English well.⁴ Poor incentives, the lack of financial aid and other support services, difficult transitions among education programs, and limited understanding of the benefits of postsecondary education are just a few of the roadblocks many adults face when trying to increase their education and skills.

Not only do individuals confront barriers, but states and education institutions also encounter challenges when trying to increase the number of adults with postsecondary education and training. Fragmented data systems, rising delivery costs associated with postsecondary education, and substantial decreases in state budgets due to the recession have made it more difficult for state institutions to deliver the programs and support services many working adults need to obtain postsecondary credentials.

Despite these challenges, states can implement policy and program changes that result in a more skilled workforce with a higher proportion of adults with postsecondary education and training.[†] To improve postsecondary credential attainment rates for adults, state institutions will need to:

- Provide flexible and integrated learning environments;
- Offer comprehensive support services;
- Use cross-institutional data to track performance; and
- Create financing structures to incentivize improved performance.

As used in this guide, the term “postsecondary credential” includes traditional degrees, such as an associate or a bachelor's degree as well as occupational certificates that are industry-validated. This guide also focuses on credentials that are recognized as valuable by employers and hold financial reward in the labor market for workers.

* As used in this guide, the term “adult” refers to individuals 18 years of age or older who have one or more of the following characteristics: delayed entry into postsecondary education or training programs; financial independence; dependents other than a spouse; and working at least part-time.

† As used in this guide, the term “states” includes all U.S. territories and commonwealths.

ADULT LEARNERS AND STATE COMPETITIVENESS

Without an increase in the proportion of adults who hold a postsecondary degree or credential, states cannot successfully compete in today's global and technology-based economy. By 2018, 63 percent of all jobs—approximately 30 million jobs—will require some postsecondary education.⁵ However, the United States currently does not have enough skilled workers to fill these positions, with less than half of the current labor force holding an associate or higher-level degree. To fill this skills gap, an *additional* 3 million individuals, beyond those currently pursuing a degree, will need to obtain a postsecondary credential.⁶

Simply stated, the gap between the number of positions requiring postsecondary education and the number of qualified workers available to fill these jobs cannot be met through younger individuals moving through the education pipeline alone. The skill levels of today's adults must also be upgraded.

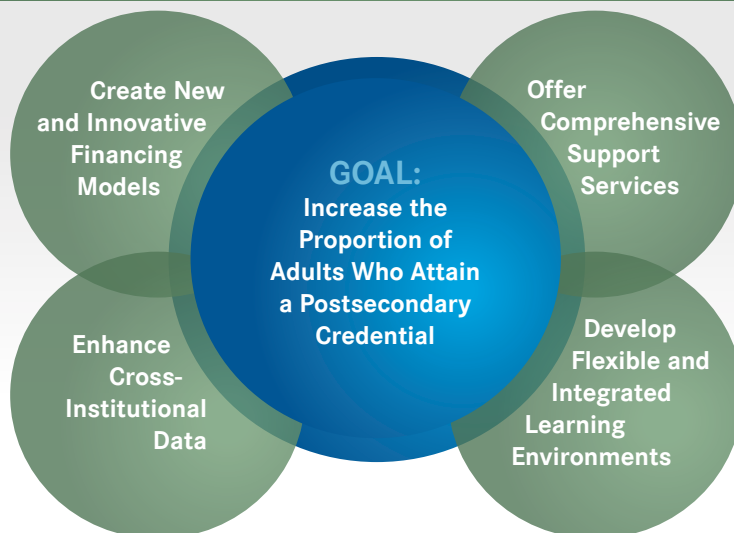
Most other industrialized nations are seeing a rise in degree attainment, but U.S. young adults are on track to be less educated than their parents. Compared with other industrialized nations, the United States also ranks very poorly in terms of the percentage of students who complete a degree program. In addition, only one-quarter of individuals enrolled in postsecondary education are “traditional students” (i.e., enrolled in a four-year higher education institution on a full-time basis and financially dependent on their parents). All these trends, along with demographic shifts portending an older population, suggest the need for more education and training in the adult workforce.

To meet the education and skill needs of both businesses and individuals, states can focus resources on four policy areas that are most likely to result in an increase in the proportion of adults with a postsecondary credential:

- Flexible and integrated learning environments;
- Comprehensive support services for adult learners;
- Cross-institutional data to track performance; and
- Innovative financing models to support adult postsecondary programs.

By taking action in these four policy areas, states can work toward a comprehensive model resulting in a more highly educated workforce (see Figure 1). A comprehensive model for state action must also coordinate state systems of education, economic development, workforce development, and human services. In addition, greater accountability can be embedded in the system.

Figure 1: A Model for State Action to Increase Postsecondary Credentials Among Adults



THE PAYOFF OF A CREDENTIALLED WORKFORCE

Postsecondary credential attainment is valuable to both individual workers and state economies. The education level of a state's workforce is a key driver of productivity and per-capita personal income.⁷ Various noneconomic benefits also arise for states and communities with an increase in the education level of adults.

BENEFITS TO INDIVIDUALS

Adults with a postsecondary credential generally earn more than those with no more than a high school diploma. In the short term, postsecondary credentials afford workers access to career fields that would not otherwise be available to them without higher education. This improves their job prospects, especially in transitioning economies with new sectors of work such as alternative energy. In the long term, workers who earn postsecondary credentials are more likely to improve their lifetime income (see table). Estimated average lifetime earnings are lowest for workers who do not hold a high school diploma; these workers earn almost three times less than workers with a bachelor's degree and almost two times less than workers with an associate degree.⁸

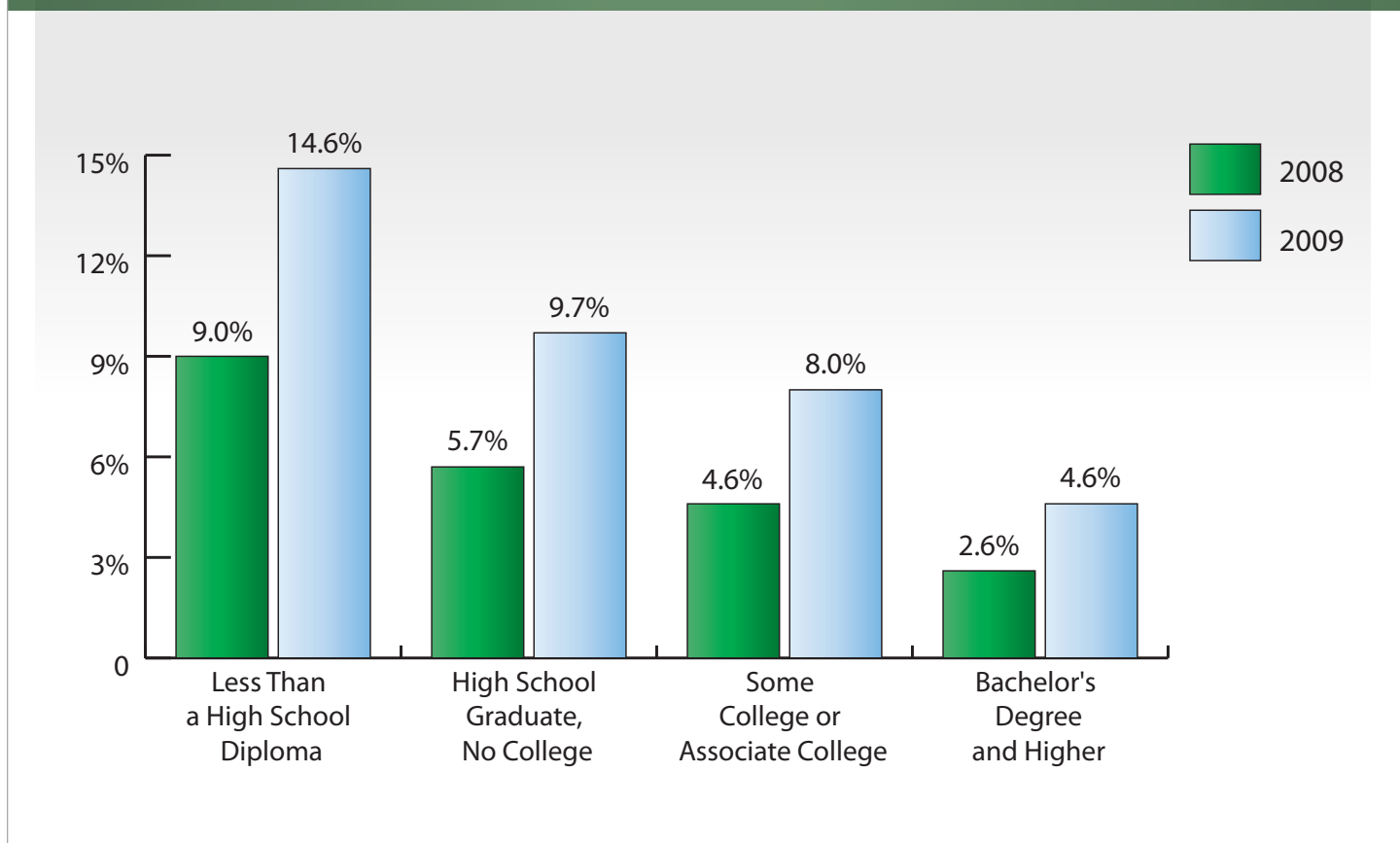
Average Lifetime Earnings by Education Level

Education Level	Estimated Average Lifetime Earnings
Bachelor's Degree	\$3,380,060
Associate Degree	\$2,254,765
Some College	\$2,239,548
High School Diploma	\$1,767,025
High School Dropout	\$1,198,447

Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, "Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018" (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2010).

Workers with higher levels of education also benefit from greater job security, especially during economic downturns. In 2009, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 8.0 percent of adult workers with some postsecondary education or an associate degree were unemployed, while 9.7 percent of adults with no postsecondary education were unemployed (see Figure 2). Individuals without a high school diploma fared even worse, with an unemployment rate of 14.6 percent.⁹

Figure 2: Unemployment Rate by Education Level, 2008 and 2009



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics.

BENEFITS TO STATES

States also enjoy various benefits as a result of increased credential attainment among adults. Individuals with higher levels of education typically earn more in the labor market, which results in higher tax payments as well as a reduced likelihood of drawing public resources such as cash assistance and health care.¹⁰ Specifically, compared with adults with a college degree, high school graduates are more than five times more likely to receive some type of public benefits or a cash assistance grant.¹¹ Individuals with some postsecondary education also depend less on employment-related programs, such as workers' compensation and unemployment insurance.¹²

Improved credential attainment also brings many noneconomic benefits. Improving a mother's education level increases the use of prenatal care, reduces the likelihood of smoking, and improves infant health.¹³ These intergenerational benefits create long-term value for states, including reduced health care costs and reduced crime rates.¹⁴

BENEFITS TO BUSINESSES

Investments in adult postsecondary education and training benefit businesses in terms of improved employee performance and productivity, increased employee retention rates, and reduced administrative time and costs.¹⁵ Government-business partnerships that offer educational opportunities for adults, particularly those in low-wage, low-skill occupations, can help mitigate skills gaps for businesses while creating new opportunities for individuals through education and training. In particular, targeting adults with some postsecondary education but no degree is one way to meet the needs of businesses, especially those facing critical labor shortages such as in the education, health care, and science and technology fields. When states invest in policies and programs that help adults with some postsecondary education quickly "skill up," businesses can rapidly and effectively meet their workforce needs.

BARRIERS TO BUILDING A MORE CREDENTIALLED WORKFORCE

Barriers to improving a state's labor force stem largely from the mismatch between traditional approaches to credentialing and the needs of adult learners. The lack of student support services, inflexible course delivery methods, and limited financial resources can all pose formidable barriers to adults' successful attainment of postsecondary credentials. Barriers also include those that institutions face as they try to accomplish more with fewer resources in today's weak economy.

LACK OF STUDENT SUPPORTS

Like other students, many adults face multiple barriers when trying to obtain a postsecondary degree, including unfamiliarity with school processes and policies, family and work responsibilities, and tuition and related costs. In addition, many adults enter higher education without the basic skills necessary to succeed. In 2008, 59 percent of community college students required at least one remedial course during their first year in college.¹⁶ Remedial courses do not count toward an associate or a bachelor's degree, so adults who must successfully complete these courses before taking credit-bearing courses incur additional costs to obtain a degree. The lack of support services, such as child care, academic tutoring, transportation assistance, and career and personal counseling, can also prevent adult success in higher education.

LACK OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Many postsecondary institutions have not adjusted to the changing demographics of higher education. Nearly a third of all students seeking an associate or a bachelor's degree are above age 24. Yet course scheduling often reflects traditional but outdated assumptions, such as students are between 18 and 22 years of age and attend school full time during the day.¹⁷ Working adults can also be discouraged from seeking postsecondary degrees by the lack of asynchronous learning opportunities (e.g., online learning) that enable students to complete classes on their own schedules. In addition, the absence of credit transfer agreements across institutions and the shortage of modular or bridge programs that link remedial and credit-bearing courses can create serious barriers to success for working learners.

LACK OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

A difficult economic climate is the controlling factor for many state policy choices, and postsecondary education is no exception. Improving postsecondary credential attainment rates must be done within the context of budget constraints. This challenge is compounded by declining public investments in postsecondary education in many states, particularly with the onset of the recession in late 2007.¹⁸ Not only do postsecondary institutions face a lack of financial resources, but many adults also confront difficulties when trying to meet the costs associated with postsecondary education. The lack of financial assistance, both academic (e.g., tuition assistance) and nonacademic (e.g., child care), for working adults, particularly those attending postsecondary institutions on a part-time or episodic basis, can pose a significant barrier to degree or certificate attainment.



“The lack of student support services, inflexible course delivery methods, and limited financial resources can all pose formidable barriers to adults’ successful attainment of postsecondary credentials.”

KEY AREAS FOR STATE ACTION

States can improve adult postsecondary credential rates by making strategic use of resources and reforming current practice in four core policy areas: learning environments, support services, data and performance measures, and financing. Each area plays a critical role. Taken together, they form a comprehensive model for state action to improve the education and skills of today's adults. Undergirding all policy areas are the importance of leadership, the role of technology, and the need to meet employer demands.

FLEXIBLE AND INTEGRATED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Adult learners often face professional and family obligations that prevent them from enrolling in full-time programs or traditional long-term programs that require two to five years of coursework. Innovative and flexible learning environments often are essential to help adults quickly build on their skills and obtain a postsecondary degree or credential. States can:

- Provide modular, short-term programs that can be stacked over time as well as integrated programs that develop basic skills within the context of occupational certifications;
- Create or further develop career pathways in high-demand industries and require colleges to develop clear, ongoing accounting of course requirements for credentials tied to specific industries;
- Call for credit transfer agreements across all public two-year and four-year institutions, as well as across certification and degree tracks, to promote multiple on-ramps to degree completion for adults, including offering academic credit for prior work experience;
- Review policies related to online learning, with an eye toward removing regulatory barriers to developing and expanding online programming; and
- Encourage state institutions to target adults with some college credit, but no degree, to return to postsecondary education.



INTEGRATED PROGRAMMING

Adults with low skill and literacy levels often require some preparatory coursework to succeed in a postsecondary program. Because some low-skilled adults must complete basic education courses prior to enrolling in a postsecondary program, degree completion can be more expensive, time consuming, and difficult to navigate.

To help students overcome some of these challenges, state institutions can develop programs that integrate basic skills instruction within the context of career education as well as postsecondary academic instruction. Integrated programs help students quickly acquire critical basic skills, such as reading, language, writing, and mathematics, while preparing them for further postsecondary education or careers. Programs usually are offered in a flexible and compressed time schedule, and they typically require strong coordination across staff in postsecondary institutions and the business community. Basic instructional content is nested within a specific career or academic path, so students also are more likely to stay enrolled through completion.

Washington has been a national leader in implementing integrated programs that combine basic skills with career education. Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) offers basic skills instruction within the context of technical education, enabling students to receive the support of experienced basic skills instructors while earning credit toward a certificate or degree. Adult literacy and career-technical instructors co-teach courses, so students gain critical literacy and career skills. I-BEST programs must include college-level vocational credit and must be designed to meet the demands of local employers.

Students enrolled in I-BEST receive multiple wraparound services, helping adults balance life-work demands while pursuing their education goals. Typical I-BEST students include adult basic education/English language learners with or without a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants, dislocated workers, and high school students with weak basic skills. To reflect the additional cost of integrated programming, community colleges receive 1.75 times the amount of per-pupil funding for an I-BEST student as for a traditional full-time enrolled student.

This higher per-pupil funding rate reflects the 50 percent overlap of basic skills and technical skills instruction. The additional funding also recognizes the important role that intensive support services play in student success. Students participating in I-BEST are more likely to earn a certificate as well as college credits, compared with individuals with similar characteristics who are not enrolled in the program.¹⁹

Several other states have launched integrated programs to help low-skilled adults attain postsecondary credentials more quickly. The **Minnesota** Training, Resources and Credentialing for Pathways to Sustainable Employment (FastTRAC) program uses a modular approach to credential attainment. Adapted from Washington's I-BEST program, adults can enroll in courses that combine basic academic and English language skills with career and technical education. Incremental credentials are incorporated into career pathways, so students who must exit a program can return and build on earlier credentials. Sometimes referred to as "stacking," this approach can help reduce barriers to re-enrollment. Approximately 2,000 clients have been served through the program, which is being funded through state Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds, philanthropic investments, and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars.

Illinois created a statewide plan to help low-skilled adults quickly obtain a postsecondary degree valued by employers through "bridge" programs. Initially piloted at 10 community colleges throughout the state, students enrolled in the bridge programs simultaneously receive instruction in basic academic skills and occupational instruction. In addition to contextualized learning, students can obtain other services, including career development and transition counseling and assistance in accessing support services such as child care and financial aid. As a result of the pilot program, Illinois now has a common definition of bridge programs implemented across basic education, community college, and WIA partners. The next priority for the state is to expand its data systems so providers can better evaluate their programs based on student outcomes.

REGIONAL CAREER PATHWAYS

Regional career pathways are connected education and training programs that can help adults quickly gain a postsecondary credential demanded by employers. The programs are "mapped," enabling students to easily understand what courses they need to obtain a specific credential and what degrees are necessary to

OREGON'S 40-40-20 GOAL

In 2007, Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski announced an education goal for the state, known as "40-40-20." By 2025, 40 percent of all Oregon residents will hold a bachelor's or higher-level degree, 40 percent will have an associate degree or professional certificate, and the remaining 20 percent will have a least a high school diploma or its equivalent. In 2007, the Oregon legislature established the 40-40-20 goal in statute through HB 3141.

One way to achieve the 40-40-20 goal is through the state's career pathways initiative. Regional career pathways focus on student transitions, providing a direct path from precollege courses to credit-bearing postsecondary programs and from community colleges to universities or jobs. Pathways also tie subassociate certificates to local labor market demand by having local employers sign off on the competencies required for completion. Courses and certificates are then tied to those competencies.

Oregon is approaching career pathways in a systemic way, drawing on resources from across traditionally compartmentalized programs. The state braids multiple financial sources to support career pathways programs including Perkins, WIA Title I and Title II, and TANF funds along with resources from the governor's office. Begun as a pilot program, now more than 150 career pathways certificates are approved at all 17 community colleges throughout the state. Oregon has set the goal of increasing career pathways certificate completions statewide by 400 percent from 2008 to 2011.



advance within specific industries. Their multiple entry points recognize that adults enter postsecondary education programs at different levels. Students also are offered support services (e.g., academic and career counseling) to help them overcome common barriers to education attainment and employment. Many programs also link students to employment opportunities, so they can gain valuable on-the-job experience while working toward a degree or credential.

Key to the effectiveness of career pathways are the partnerships between employers and education and training providers that enable adults to quickly obtain the skills, on-the-job experience, and postsecondary credential necessary to qualify for jobs. Several states have developed statewide career pathways initiatives, including **Arkansas, Montana, Virginia, and Washington.** **Oregon** launched a career pathways initiative in 2004. The state recognized it had to train more workers for middle-skill occupations to remain economically competitive. The state also recognized that adults entering the workforce have different levels of need and that transition points among education and training providers must be easier to navigate for adults to succeed in the postsecondary education system. (See, also, Oregon's 40-40-20 Goal on page 11).

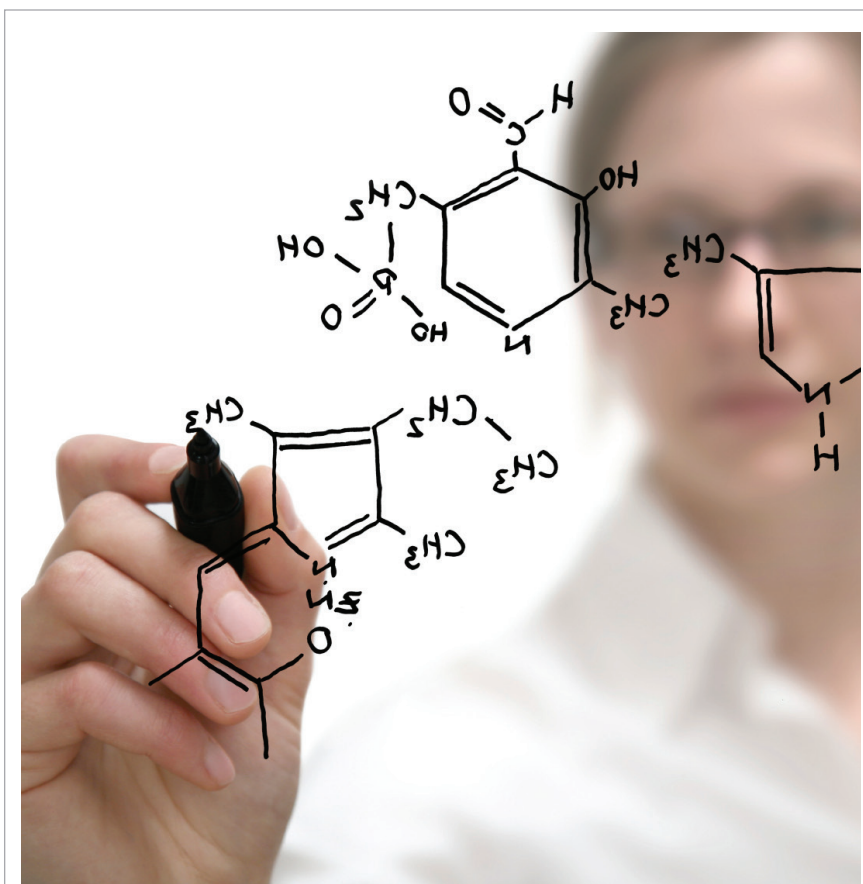
CREDIT TRANSFER AGREEMENTS ACROSS THE POSTSECONDARY SYSTEM

Many adult postsecondary students do not stay within one institution for the entire time it takes to earn their degree. According to the Community College Research Center, up to 40 percent of community college students enroll in multiple institutions within a six-year period.²⁰ A failure to accommodate these transitions creates problems for both students and states. The lack of reciprocity can discourage students from re-enrolling in school if they think their credits will not transfer. Moreover, students may be forced to take courses they have already taken at a prior institution. This can unnecessarily duplicate instruction at significant cost to the state and individual.

States can address this problem by instituting credit transfer agreements across campuses within the public higher education system. In 2008, **Tennessee** expanded its credit transfer agreement between two-year colleges and the public university system. The agreement now covers 100 percent of general education requirements and 75 percent of majors at the associate level.²¹ The faculty senate at each University of Tennessee campus approved the full transferability of the general education curriculum for students who complete an associate degree at any in-state community college and enroll in the University of Tennessee. In most states, implementation of credit transfer agreements will require similar approval by campus or system boards, but governors can take a leadership role in making easy transfer of credits a state priority.

ONLINE LEARNING

New developments in online learning offer states different ways to boost the capacity of their postsecondary system and improve the credential attainment rate of their adult workforce. These benefits stem from the ability of online education to offer flexible schedules that accommodate the unique needs of each student. Such flexibility is



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attractive to many of the populations that can benefit the most from a postsecondary credential.

Through cross-state collaborations, Western Governors University (WGU) was founded as a nonprofit online university. WGU is both nationally and regionally accredited, offering a competency-based curriculum that enables progress toward a degree based on demonstrated skills rather than number of credit hours enrolled. WGU also has been lauded for its affordability, costing approximately \$6,000 per year. Although WGU already enrolls students from the 50 states, some states have formalized their partnership with the institution. **Indiana** Governor Mitch Daniels issued an executive order that allows Indiana residents to use state scholarships to pay for tuition in approved WGU programs. The executive order also clarifies that WGU will not receive institutional funding from the state.

The Center for Adult Learning in Louisiana (CALL) offers 13 online programs in accelerated formats for adult learners. Jointly operated by the **Louisiana** Board of Regents and the Southern Regional Education Board, CALL specifically targets adults and is provided exclusively online to accommodate the schedule of working students. Courses are taught in four- and eight-week formats, so adults can focus on a single subject and quickly advance their studies. Time-to-degree completion also is accelerated through prior learning assessments, which award students college credit for work, volunteer, or life experiences. All programs offered through CALL are financial aid-eligible, helping to increase affordability. Moreover, students are provided wraparound services, including counseling, to help guide them in their studies.

OUTREACH TO STUDENTS WITH CREDITS BUT NO DEGREE

Individuals with some college credit but no degree can be some of the most cost-effective students to recruit back to school. A partially completed degree represents sunk costs to both students and states. These sunk costs include student loan debt, lost earnings, and direct state and student spending. Recruitment strategies targeting students with credits but no degree are most effective when implemented alongside comprehensive support services such as child care, financial aid, and academic counseling, which can help adult learners balance education with other life demands.

Kentucky's Project Graduate seeks to recruit students with 90 or more college credit hours but no bachelor's degree to return to school and complete their degree. According to estimates by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, nearly 300,000 Kentuckians have some college credit but no degree. Individuals who return to school as part of Project Graduate get free applications, priority enrollment status, access to individualized advising, and financial aid counseling. Colleges participating in Project Graduate have promoted the program and recruited students through press releases, direct mailings, college fairs, and advertisements in various media. Project Graduate is a collaborative initiative between the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education and individual postsecondary education institutions to help increase the education level of all residents in the state. As of the spring 2009 semester, more than 400 students were enrolled at public postsecondary education institutions through Project Graduate, generating \$730,000 in additional tuition revenue for the state.²²

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COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT SERVICES

Adult students typically have work and family responsibilities in addition to those associated with their postsecondary education, so providing support services can be a powerful component in helping individuals complete a postsecondary degree or credential. Although states will need to determine which expanded services are viable given financial constraints, adult learners must be a priority to meet current and future workforce needs. States can:

- Encourage interagency partnerships to provide wraparound support services beyond the classroom, including transportation, child care, and career counseling;
- Improve student access to federal financial aid by ensuring all community college campuses participate in the federal student loan program and encouraging institutions to maintain evening and weekend hours at financial aid offices to meet the needs of adult students and assist them with aid applications; and
- Review state financial aid policies to ensure programs address the needs of working adult students, particularly those attending school on a part-time basis.

WRAPAROUND SERVICES

A focus on instruction alone is not enough to ensure academic success for some adult learners. Transportation issues, child care problems, financial difficulties, and career uncertainties can be challenging for working adults. Although often difficult to fund and sustain, support services such as transportation and child care assistance can play a critical role in many adults' ability to obtain a postsecondary degree or credential. Academic support services, including career and personal counseling, can also be important in helping adults persist in their postsecondary studies.

In **Arkansas**, the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) has partnered with local division of child care and early childhood education (DCCECE) offices to connect students to state subsidies for child care. An advantage of this coordination is that subsidized child care can now yield even greater returns for the state, because it assists parents in earning postsecondary credentials. The partnership between CPI and DCCECE is formalized with career pathways sites equipped with the necessary paperwork to help adults seek child care support. As CPI students, parents receive priority processing of their request.²³ In addition to child care assistance, each student is assigned a tutor and a counselor to help address any education issues that arise as well as help him or her obtain other needed support services. CPI is supported through federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds at approximately \$12 million per year. A very high success rate has been achieved, with 90 percent of students completing the program or continuing their studies into the next semester.²⁴ In 2009, more than 1,500 individuals received a certificate of proficiency, a technical certificate, or an associate degree through the program.²⁵

Kentucky's Ready-to-Work (RtW) program provides services to TANF clients who are enrolled in community and technical colleges.²⁶ Services include case management, advising and career counseling, and other campus and community-based services. In addition, students can receive TANF-funded support services such as transportation and child care. An important component of RtW is the opportunity for clients to work in the public or private sector in their field of study. Since the program's launch, more than 1,000 students have graduated from an institution within the Kentucky Community and Technical College System.

Intermediary organizations can also assist adult students in accessing critical support services to help propel them to success. Operating in several community colleges, Single Stop USA provides free services that can support student academic efforts. Single Stop counselors help students identify work support programs (e.g., the Earned Income Tax Credit) and public benefits besides financial aid (e.g., food stamps) for which they may qualify. Students can also receive free services, including legal counseling, financial counseling, and tax preparation. Preliminary evaluation data from select sites show increased semester-to-semester retention rates for students who receive services through Single Stop.²⁷

FINANCIAL AID

Increases in the cost of higher education have outpaced nearly all other sectors of the U.S. economy except for health care. Some of these costs have been borne by states, which remain the largest single investor for most public institutions. Most of the increased costs of higher education have been borne by students, however, who continue to assume unprecedented debt.

Helping students cover the costs of higher education is a crucial element of a workforce development strategy. When estimating the annual cost of enrolling in higher education, states should consider textbooks, transportation, and child care expenses on top of tuition costs. Moreover, to reach more adult learners, state student aid eligibility requirements should accommodate part-time and full-time students.

Wisconsin's Opportunity Grant program is one example of state investment in college affordability using need-based grants for part-time students and limiting recipients to those with household income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.²⁸ Beyond providing up to \$1,000 for tuition at a Wisconsin technical college, a portion of the opportunity grant can also be used for wraparound services. Approved expenses defined by the state include paying for tools, uniforms, and licensure exam fees as well as transportation, child care, and other supports necessary for successful participation in training.²⁹

Washington's Opportunity Grant program offers financial support to low-wage students who are enrolled in an identified high-wage, high-demand career pathway. Students must have a household income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and maintain a 2.0 grade point average or higher to participate in the program. Financial assistance provided through the program can be used for fees, books, tuition, and supplies. In addition, students enrolled in the program receive various support services, including tutoring, counseling, mentoring, and career advising. In many areas, students have a single point of contact who coordinates both financial and support services. Opportunity Grant program students have higher retention and completion rates than their counterparts not participating in the program.³⁰

Ensuring students are fully informed about federal funding sources is another strategy for improving college affordability while minimizing state expenditures. Offering assistance with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) can result in more students receiving aid as well as more aid per student. Moreover, maintaining financial aid offices with evening and weekend hours is necessary for part-time and working students, but this is not done consistently across postsecondary institutions.³¹

Ensuring all community college campuses in a state are participating in the federal student loan program is another step to encourage adults to pursue a postsecondary credential. According to The Project on Student Debt, roughly 1 in 10 community college students attend a school that does not participate in the federal loan program.³² An estimated 900,000 students in 31 states are prevented from accessing federal loan support for their postsecondary credential. Many community colleges do not participate in the federal student loan program for fear that students will default on their loans, thereby increasing the college's risk of sanctions and impeding its ability to disburse federal aid in the future.³³ The cost of administering the federal student loan program can also be too high for some colleges. Without this resource, students and/or states must finance the entire cost of the degree. Although federal student loans may not be the right choice for all students, the option should be available for students who decide they need this assistance.

“Helping students cover the costs of higher education is a crucial element of a workforce development strategy. When estimating the annual cost of enrolling in higher education, states should consider textbooks, transportation, and child care expenses on top of tuition costs.”



TRACKING PERFORMANCE

Many states are improving their education data collection capacity, especially in the K–12 arena. Postsecondary education and workforce development could similarly benefit from these advances, enabling states to make more targeted spending choices that reward high achievement and direct resources away from ineffective programs. Improved systems that include postsecondary and workforce data ultimately result in better decisionmaking capabilities for policymakers and students. To increase the effectiveness of data, states can:

- Advocate for institutional performance measures that track student progress, completion, and employment in training-related jobs;
- Require key institutional performance measures to be made public and accessible;
- Promote the integration of data systems across K–20 education institutions and workforce development systems by brokering data-matching agreements across state agencies, hiring third-party data administrators, or creating new data systems; and
- Identify how federal and state resources are being used to build or improve comprehensive data systems between the education and workforce development sectors and determine opportunities for linkage and advancement.

CLEAR INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE MEASURES

The collection of data on institutional performance is essential, yet many states do not have accurate cross-institutional data on student progress or achievement. Instead, enrollment and total degrees awarded are used as proxies of performance. States can gather and report more comprehensive and outcome-oriented data on institutional performance to improve policies and determine the return on investments in postsecondary education and training.

To more accurately assess the effectiveness of postsecondary education institutions, states can implement performance measures that evaluate outcomes and assess the progress of adult students. Outcome performance measures include graduation rates, transfer rates, and time to degree. In addition, measures should track employment outcomes for students who have obtained a postsecondary credential as well as whether industry needs have been met through education and training. Student progress measures include progression from remedial to credit-bearing courses, course completion rates, and retention rates. More specific information and ideas of common college metrics that states can use to shape funding strategies and identify areas in need of improvement can be found in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices' report *Common College Completion Metrics*, published as part of the *Complete to Compete* initiative.³⁴

Connecticut and **Ohio** are gathering placement test scores for all students enrolled in community colleges, from the colleges themselves or from the companies producing the tests. The data will be used to gauge students' progress according to their level of performance on the placement exam. This will help college leaders set pass rates based on the likelihood of student success and identify areas for improvement, such as increasing success rates in remedial education courses.³⁵

North Carolina has created a matrix that identifies five critical success factors by which the state evaluates its 58 community colleges.³⁶

- *Student success*: Indicators include pass rates on licensure/certification exams, pass rates for developmental education courses, and performance of transfer students.
- *Workforce development*: Indicators include employment status of graduates, employer satisfaction with graduates, and employer satisfaction with training programs.
- *Response to the learning needs of diverse populations*: Indicators include number and percentage of high school dropouts served in basic skills programs, enrollment in English-as-a-Second-Language courses, and enrollment of underrepresented students.

- *Resources:* Indicators include faculty salaries as a percentage of the regional average, number of faculty and staff participating in professional development activities, and percentage of facilities meeting satisfactory building condition.
- *Technology:* Indicators include number of courses offered by electronic means and enrollment in virtual courses.

INTEGRATION OF STATE DATA SYSTEMS

Creating longitudinal data systems that link a person’s participation in postsecondary education and training programs to wage and employment data enables states to accurately measure the true payoff of a degree or certificate. Integrated data systems are not restricted to the reporting of a single institution or federal program, but rather link individual-level data across institutions. Currently, 23 states share data between their postsecondary system and workforce systems.³⁷ In addition, 10 states are able to link K–12 data to information from the workforce system as of 2009.³⁸ Barriers that states often cite in linking education and workforce data include a lack of common identification, a lack of coordination, incompatible systems, and privacy issues.

Despite barriers, data integration is an important tool for making sound policy decisions and determining the return on investment of education and training programs for individuals, businesses, and states. Integration can take many forms. One strategy is to broker data-matching agreements across state agencies that establish shared classification systems. **Washington** has developed agreements to link individual K–12 information, including data on graduation rates and student characteristics, to postsecondary data from two- and four-year institutions and apprenticeship programs. The state also links education data to employment and earnings information. The state plans to tie education and workforce data to human services information, including data on TANF, Medicaid, and food assistance, and to early learning information. By linking data from multiple institutions, state leaders can determine whether students are employed after graduation and their earnings, whether students are working while pursuing postsecondary education, and what social and income characteristics students possess.³⁹

Another strategy to integrate state data systems is to contract with a third-party provider that houses data from multiple agencies and provides integrated analyses of student information. For example, **Florida** is partnering with the nonprofit National Student Clearinghouse to manage its integrated data system. Through the system, the state can gauge student outcomes past the high school level to determine individual earnings, employment, military participation, and public assistance usage. The state can also track postsecondary education attainment rates and match this information with employment and wage data.

Yet another strategy states can pursue to integrate information is to build a new, consolidated system that draws from multiple institutions. **North Carolina** has committed to developing a student longitudinal data system that will track students from kindergarten through grade 12 through postsecondary education, including private sector institutions.⁴⁰

PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENTS IN ADULT LEARNERS

Walmart’s decision to partner with American Public University (APU), an online for-profit college, represents a \$50 million national effort to invest in postsecondary credential attainment. Through the partnership, Walmart’s 1.4 million employees will receive a discounted rate at APU as well as tuition assistance from Walmart. Consistent with other surveys on the needs of low-income workers, Walmart reports that 72 percent of its employees prefer the flexibility of online degree programs. APU also intends to award academic credit for some of a Walmart student’s prior work experience, accelerating time to degree.

Source: Miguel Bustillo,
“Walmart to Offer Workers Online-Degree Assistance,”
Wall Street Journal, June 3, 2010.

INNOVATIVE FINANCING

States no longer provide the majority of funding for public postsecondary higher education, though they do remain the largest single source of funding. State and local appropriations per full-time student for public postsecondary institutions increased from 1995 to 2002, only to decline in recent years because of competing budget demands and enrollment increases. The recession has only compounded this trend.⁴¹

Given these financial constraints, both states and postsecondary institutions are seeking new and innovative financing solutions to increase postsecondary attainment with available resources. Policy solutions on both sides of the ledger—increasing revenue *and* reducing costs—are integral to innovative financing models that focus on the adult learner. New financial investments, partnerships, and innovations are critical if states are to increase the number of adults with a postsecondary degree or credential. To help finance policies and programs for adult learners, states can:

- Encourage the creation of programs of study that are jointly developed and financed by education institutions and industry, including employer certification of the competencies covered by certification programs;
- Include a performance component in the higher education funding formula, or an expansion of that component if it already exists, with an explicit focus on improving postsecondary access and completion for working adults; and
- Prioritize efficiency gains as part of a higher education funding strategy, with a focus on how gains can help adults quickly obtain a postsecondary degree or credential.

COST SHARING

Although state-level investment is crucial for long-term gains in postsecondary credential attainment, so is shared fiscal responsibility for program delivery with industry, credential providers, and students (see Private Sector Investments in Adult Learners on page 17). This can be achieved through various means.

One example of industry investment in public higher education involves shared education savings accounts. **Maine** established the first statewide demonstration project for Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs).⁴² LiLAs are portable, employee-owned accounts that employers agree to match, based on negotiations with employees or the state. They can be used to pay for postsecondary education and training courses as well as related supplies and books. In addition, LiLA holders often have access to career counselors to help them reach their education and employment goals. In Maine, LiLAs are managed by the Maine Finance Authority, with the accounts being piloted through the state’s network of workforce development career centers. By January 2009, 10 companies had joined Maine’s LiLA program.⁴³

Combining public resources to support a common program can be an effective strategy for leveraging dollars and financing postsecondary education and training opportunities for adults. Through “braiding,” a term commonly used to describe the merging of public dollars for a common purpose, states can leverage resources while keeping categorical funds distinct. For example, **Oregon**’s Career Pathways Initiative braids Perkins, TANF, WIA, and state general funds to finance career pathways programs within the postsecondary education system.⁴⁴

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING APPROACHES

To promote savings, states can consider performance-based funding formulas that reward efficiency and other state priorities, including adult learners. One example of implementing an alternative funding approach is adjusting the enrollment count used to calculate formula funding. Currently, most states apportion public funding based on beginning-of-the-year enrollment figures.

This approach offers no incentive to see students through to completion of the academic year. Instead, states should consider setting student census reporting deadlines at the end of the semester or academic year rather than at the beginning of the academic year. This would incentivize institutions to focus on course and program completion, not just enrollment.

Indiana has also used performance-based funding to reward course and degree completion, two-to-four-year transfer activity, and on-time graduation. Although the proportion of funding centering on performance-based criteria is relatively small, the state hopes to gradually shift the focus of higher education institutions to outcomes rather than just enrollments. Indiana has also used performance indicators to cut as well as allocate funds to institutions.⁴⁵

In 2009, **Washington** implemented the Student Achievement Initiative, a performance-based funding model for community colleges. Funding is now based on four categories of student measures: building college-level skills, increasing first-year retention rates, completing college-level math, and improving completion rates. As colleges help students achieve their education goals and complete programs of study, they receive greater financial rewards. Institutional funding is based on achieving annual progress on student outcomes, rather than on reaching predetermined targets.

Pennsylvania encourages community colleges to tie programs of study to high-priority occupational areas through an economic development stipend. Community colleges receive the stipend based on the number of full-time-equivalent students enrolled in occupational courses or programs of study recognized as high priority for the state or a specific region. High-priority credit programs with high instructional costs are weighted the most within the funding formula.⁴⁶

EFFICIENCY GAINS

States can prioritize efficiency gains as part of their higher education funding strategy, identifying ways to reduce the costs of credential attainment without reducing quality or capacity. One immediate opportunity for improvement is reducing time to degree. The rise in average time to degree increases the cost of providing each degree. Extended time to degree also increases costs for students in the form of lost wages. For adult learners, offering academic credit for prior work experience can accelerate time to degree. Financial aid programs that help adult students move from part-time to full-time enrollment can also increase the pace at which students acquire credits. In addition, institutions can focus on administrative and academic efficiencies; cost savings can then be reinvested in efforts that serve adults.

In 2009, **Ohio**'s university system formed a statewide advisory committee on efficiencies to identify, implement, and replicate cost savings on an ongoing basis. The committee is charged with helping colleges and universities achieve efficiency gains equal to 3 percent of their operating budgets. The group's work focuses on five key areas: academic programs, administrative services, energy, information technology, and procurement. The university system realized cost savings of more than \$200 million in 2009 alone from a prescription drug program that emphasized bulk purchasing and use of generic drugs.⁴⁷ The committee's charge explicitly states that a key priority for reinvestment is promoting access and success for undergraduate students. The savings realized by the system are helping contain the push for tuition increases and, therefore, make certificate and degree programs more financially accessible for working adults.

“Combining public resources to support a common program can be an effective strategy for leveraging dollars and financing postsecondary education and training opportunities for adults. Through “braiding,” a term commonly used to describe the merging of public dollars for a common purpose, states can leverage resources while keeping categorical funds distinct. “



CONCLUSION

Most new jobs in the U.S. economy now demand postsecondary education or training. States seeking to boost their competitive edge will want to focus immediately on increasing the share of their adult population with a postsecondary degree or credential. Although states currently face difficult choices in this rough fiscal environment, various options exist to improve adult postsecondary credential attainment rates.

State action can focus on four key policy areas: flexible and integrated learning environments, comprehensive support services, cross-institutional data to track performance, and innovative financing. Although each area is essential to raise the credential attainment rate of the state workforce, specific strategies should be selected and pursued based on the needs of each state.

By improving postsecondary attainment rates among adults, particularly those with low skills, states can increase individual talent while also meeting the demands of local businesses. With an increase in national attention on adult postsecondary education and training issues, many states now recognize the importance of investing in adult learners to compete and succeed in a global and technology-based economy. Bringing successful local programs to scale, investing in technology, and informing individuals of the benefits of increased training and education are critical for developing a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. Through executive leadership, states, businesses, and individuals can all benefit from improved postsecondary attainment opportunities for adults.



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NGA CENTER DIVISIONS

The NGA Center is organized into five divisions with some collaborative projects across all divisions.

- **Economic, Human Services & Workforce** focuses on best practices, policy options, and service delivery improvements across a range of current and emerging issues, including economic development and innovation, workforce development, employment services, research and development policies, and human services for children, youth, low-income families, and people with disabilities.
- **Education** provides information on best practices in early childhood, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. Specific issues include common core state standards and assessments; teacher effectiveness; high school redesign; science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education; postsecondary education attainment, productivity, and accountability; extra learning opportunities; and school readiness.
- **Environment, Energy & Transportation** identifies best practices and provides technical assistance on issues including clean energy for the electricity and transportation sectors, energy and infrastructure financing, green economic development, transportation and land use planning, and clean up and stewardship of nuclear weapons sites.
- **Health** covers a broad range of health financing, service delivery, and coverage issues, including implementation of federal health reforms, quality initiatives, cost-containment policies, health information technology, state public health initiatives, and Medicaid.
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