ETA Sector Strategies Technical Assistance Initiative:
SECTOR STRATEGIES AND CAREER PATHWAYS:
A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL ALLIANCE
About This Brief

This resource is part of a series of integrated briefs to help workforce practitioners build a range of skills needed to launch and advance sector strategy approaches. The briefs are designed to be succinct and connect readers to existing resources, best practices, and tools. For more information, visit Sector Strategies: An Overview on WorkforceGPS.org.

About Sector Strategies

Sector strategies are regional, industry-focused approaches to building skilled workforces and are among the most effective ways to align public and private resources to address the talent needs of employers. While the approach is not new, there is a growing body of evidence showing that sector strategies can simultaneously improve employment opportunities for job seekers and the competitiveness of industries. As such, a number of national initiatives and federal laws (including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) are driving workforce organizations, in particular, to embrace these approaches, to meet both the needs of workers and the needs of the economy.

At the heart of sector strategies are sector partnerships (sometimes referred to as industry partnerships, workforce collaboratives or regional skills alliances, among others). These partnerships are led by businesses—within a critical industry cluster—working collaboratively with workforce areas, education and training, economic development, labor, and community organizations to identify and solve pressing human resource and other challenges. Sector partnerships are the vehicle through which businesses voice their talent needs and regional partners collaborate to develop customized solutions to meet those business needs.
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SECTOR STRATEGIES AND CAREER PATHWAYS – A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL ALLIANCE

Over the past decade, an increasing number of workforce development systems have adopted sector strategies and career pathways approaches—two very promising and related strategies—to improve the relevance and effectiveness of education and training programs in the U.S. Both are systems change strategies designed to: meet the skill needs of in-demand industries; and prepare workers with the competencies and credentials needed for family supporting careers in targeted industries and occupations.

OVERVIEW

Sector strategies are regional, industry-focused approaches to building skilled workforces and among the most effective ways to align public and private resources to address the talent needs of employers. At the heart of sector strategies are industry sector partnerships led by businesses within a critical industry cluster, working collaboratively with workforce systems, education and training providers, economic development, labor, and community organizations. Sector partnerships are the vehicles through which industry members: voice their critical human resource needs; and form customized regional education and workforce development solutions for workers and businesses. The workforce development system should respond with a focus on long-range career development; the advancement of individuals through industry-defined career pathways; and the integration of work-based learning experiences as an essential part of training, including the expansion of Registered Apprenticeship programs, the “gold standard” of work-based learning.

Successful sector initiatives require systemic changes in business and employer behavior; and in the organization and delivery of workforce, education, and training systems. This is where career pathways approaches come into play.
Career Pathways systems provide a framework for building comprehensive education and training systems where all partners—education, workforce development, economic development, human services, along with employers (including industry partnerships) and other stakeholders—come together to design and deliver the full spectrum of education and skills training that is needed for careers in in-demand industries. At their best, career pathways align multiple programs in ways that make it easier for all individuals, including for those who are underprepared, to access, progress along, and complete pathways to industry-recognized credentials and family supporting careers.

Career pathways systems have two moving parts. They are composed of the individual employer-driven and often sector-focused pathways programs (e.g. health care, manufacturing) that are designed with the assistance of industry partnerships to prepare students/workers with the skills needed for specific occupations within an industry sector. But Career pathways systems also require systemic changes on the part of education and workforce development systems, who must agree to make significant changes in the delivery, organization, and culture of education and training—regardless of which specific sector is the focus.

The most successful career pathways systems provide: multiple entry and exit points; sequenced, modularized and contextualized coursework that aligns with stackable credentials and jobs; and the careful articulation of each educational level to the next, ending in the attainment of industry-recognized credentials. Career pathways also offer: flexible scheduling; opportunities for acceleration; work-based learning; and extensive supports and counseling services, including navigation services that help participants identify and access the most efficient routes to credential attainment and careers (often through career and course mapping). The Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration (DOLETA) just released an updated version of its Career Pathways Toolkit: An Enhanced Guide and Workbook for System Development that will be especially helpful for State offices, local workforce boards, and system partners in support of developing sector-focused career pathways systems.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) expects all workforce systems across the country to develop and align sector strategies and career pathways approaches as a new way of doing business—transforming the organization and delivery of services throughout the workforce development system.

A Career pathway as defined in WIOA, is a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that—

- Aligns with the skill needs of industries in states and regional economies;
- Prepares individuals for the full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including registered apprenticeships;
- Includes counseling to support individuals in achieving education and career goals;
- Includes education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or cluster;
- Organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of individuals in ways that accelerate their educational and career advancement;
- Enables individuals to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least one recognized postsecondary credential; and
- Helps individuals enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.
WIOA requires that states develop consensus on a clear sector strategies vision, including how state workforce boards will invest in local sector partnerships as one of their core functions; and that local workforce boards (WDBs) will engage in regional planning that results in the development and implementation of sector initiatives. WIOA gives WDBs explicit authority to develop and implement sector strategies and industry sector partnerships. WIOA also requires that states develop strategies to support the use of career pathways that provide individuals, including low-skilled adults, youth, and individuals with barriers to employment, with workforce investment activities, education, and supportive services to enter or retain employment; and that local boards, working with secondary and postsecondary education programs, lead efforts to develop and implement career pathways.

The following graphic shows how career pathways can offer on-ramps for multiple populations, and off-ramps into progressively higher levels of education and employment within a sector, that are aligned with stackable credentials. The establishment of sector-focused career pathways holds great potential for strategically meeting the skill needs of students, jobseekers and workers; and of employers and regional economies.

**Integrated Career Pathways Model** (originally developed as part of the Advancing CTE in Career Pathways Project, US ED, OCTAE)

![Figure 2](image-url)
REGIONAL EXAMPLES

Around the country, there are an increasing number of local workforce areas that are implementing sector strategies that are fully aligned with career pathways approaches. Two local workforce systems with a successful history in carrying out these aligned initiatives are the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas in Wichita, Kansas; and the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin, in Madison, Wisconsin.

SOUTH CENTRAL KANSAS

In South Central Kansas the Workforce Alliance has implemented integrated sector strategies and career pathways approaches as a way to bring employers from key industry sectors together -- to ensure the development and expansion of skilled worker pipelines for their industries. The Workforce Alliance, the Wichita region’s WDB acts as a convener of industry employers, system partners and stakeholders in pursuit of a common vision, mission and goals for sector-focused career pathways systems.

The WDB provides labor market analyses for in-demand sectors and programs; skills assessments; and collaborates with system partners and economic development agencies to assess and respond to the education and training needs of the region. It has used sector and career pathways approaches to implement a fully integrated service delivery model for its workforce system, including in its America's Job Centers, where system partners work together through sector-focused teams to provide business and participant services, including worker training. And it serves as a fiscal agent in pursuit of funding opportunities that support these strategies. Following are several of the initiatives through which the Workforce Alliance is carrying out this critical work.

In its Preparation for Advanced Career Employment System (PACES) program, the Workforce Alliance led efforts to form a regional collaborative of business and

LWDBs – Perfectly Situated to Carry out Sector and Career Pathways Activities (the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas)

- Convening partners/stakeholders in support of common vision, mission, goals for career pathways systems
- Conducting research and labor market analysis for identification of in-demand sectors & programs
- Identifying skills gaps where training is needed
- Conducting or sharing community asset audits
- Collaborating with system partners to assess education & training capacity in region/support for capacity building
- Engaging employers & convening facilitating sector partnerships
- Coordinating with partners to align services & leverage resources:
  - Counseling & career navigation
  - Job search assistance
  - Screening & assessments
  - Access to and funding for training
  - Support services
  - Helping to identify & pursue leveraged funding
industry leaders, philanthropic and community-based organizations, education and training partners, and local government to move unemployed and underemployed workers through career pathways into high-demand and high-skill careers in aviation, healthcare and advanced-manufacturing. PACES moved hundreds of jobseekers and workers into high demand and high skill careers in the targeted sectors; and provided more than 25 employers with the skilled workers they needed to remain competitive.

Through Accelerating Opportunity-Kansas, the Workforce Alliance has worked with system partners to transform adult education to provide pathways for low-skilled adults to postsecondary education and credentials in high demand careers. In Sedgwick County a partnership emerged between the Wichita Area Technical College (WATC), Goodwill Industries and the Workforce Alliance to align services and leverage resources to connect underemployed and low skilled job seekers to training programs at the National Center for Aviation Training (NCAT) for careers in aviation manufacturing.

To expand their talent pipeline, the Workforce Alliance worked to establish the Regional Manufacturing Council on Career and Technical Education (RMCTE) -- providing businesses in the manufacturing industry with a coordinated voice to influence and improve the education and skills training pipeline in South Central Kansas. With staffing from the Workforce Alliance, the RMCTE works directly with the United School District 259 (in Wichita), the Wichita Area Technical College, and other schools in South Central Kansas to raise awareness among teachers, counselors, students and parents about the variety of high paying careers in the manufacturing industry; and to inform CTE and workforce education program design and development from K-12 through postsecondary education and training.

The Workforce Alliance also plays a critical role in a 10 county collective action initiative -- The Blueprint for Regional Economic Growth (BREG)—focused on further strengthening the region’s leading industry sectors, growing the economy and leading to more jobs and better jobs. The eight industries identified for this sector initiative include: Aerospace; Advanced Manufacturing/Advanced Materials; Machinery and Metal; Healthcare; Data Services/Information Technology; Transportation and Logistics; Oil and Gas; and Agriculture. While BREG is broader than workforce development—workforce is one of five cross-cutting areas that have been identified as critical to all eight of the eight industry clusters – including workforce, communications, innovation, exports, and broadband. Subcommittees are working on ways to address each of these areas and the Workforce Alliance is the lead on workforce development – helping each cluster to build a strong regional pipeline of workers with needed soft and hard skills. Tasks of the Workforce cross-cutting initiative include: initiating dialogue between cluster employers and education/training partners; developing “career maps” showing paths available to students and employees; launching competitive youth internships; identifying and applying best practices to preparing skills for each cluster; and communicating and linking to programs that inform industries of workforce resources.

For more information about how the Workforce Alliance aligns sector and career pathways approaches for restructuring its service delivery see:

https://ion.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/06/30/10/27/VoE_Sector_Partnerships
The Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin (WDBSCW) began its involvement in sector-focused career pathways initiatives in the mid-1990s. Since that time, the WDBSCW has identified and convened industry partnerships in its driver industry sectors; and developed the education and training systems required to meet the skill needs of those high demand industry sectors. Early to recognize that career pathways approaches were needed to address the skill needs of their region, the local board and its partners built out pathway programs that were fully integrated with the region’s sector work. The WDBSCW and its partners are now taking these efforts to scale – continuing to expand services for adults, and offering sector-focused career pathways opportunities to out-of-school youth and to high school students in Madison’s school district.

WDBSCW’s Career Pathways Framework

In its PY16 local plan, the WDBSCW makes clear that under WIOA, South Central Wisconsin will further strengthen its commitment to a sector-focused career pathways system. In the plan, the WDB pledges to “deliver a results-driven Talent Development System ... built on a career pathway framework that: supports training in the skills for the driver industries and sectors in our region; provides strategic entry points to the stages of skill development for our job seekers; and provides the essential skills to support the job ladders...”
within our region’s driver industries and sectors.” The WDBSCW also provides assurances that the system will: respond to changes in driver industries and sectors skill requirements; align with education and economic development strategies and partners in the region; and provide employers, workers and jobseekers access to this talent development system through the One-Stop delivery system.

To ensure a maximum return on investment, the WDB invests training resources only in “driver industries and sectors” – high demand industry sectors where 49% of all jobs in the region are in occupations that require both training at the Associate Degree level or less and that offer a base wage of $15 per hour or more. To identify driver industries, the board closely examines: industry demand through analysis of LMI and conversations with industry; and the knowledge and skills needed by industry employers compared to the knowledge and skills of the workforce, including of individuals with barriers to employment. The WDB discusses all training content and workforce models with industry prior to making training investments, especially through its industry partnerships. The driver industry sectors in South Central Wisconsin include: agriculture, healthcare, biotechnology and life sciences, manufacturing, construction trades and utilities, and Professional/Scientific/Technical/ Information/and Management of Companies and Enterprises.

To better meet the needs of jobseekers and employers through its One-Stop delivery system, the WDBSCW has reorganized staffing for the One-Stops, particularly around its sector-focused WorkSmart Academies (described below) and through services delivered by specialized navigators who provide participants with counseling, supports and other services needed to assist with retention, completion, credential attainment, and positive program outcomes. In addition to providing triage (assessment) and career services for jobseekers and workers, the WDB offers three forms of training to participants -- WorkSmart Network Academies (in driver industry sectors); Long-term Technical Training Programs and Certifications; and Apprenticeships – all built upon the sector-focused career pathways framework; and all with designated navigators to assist participants through credential and employment attainment. The WDBSCW also engages businesses in the region through their sector teams and their 21 Employment Specialists who serve as the bridge between the workforce system and the region's businesses. The WDB aggressively works with business leaders, education, and economic development partners to form and maintain its industry partnerships throughout the region -- a key ingredient for keeping their work informed about what is happening in industry and for having champions to help build their talent pipeline solutions.

To address shorter-term but critical training needs of adults and high demand employers, WorkSmart Network (sector) Academies were established as shorter-term training programs, typically three months or less, designed to rapidly move participants into the workforce or to advance them in careers. The WDB works closely with sector employers to identify the skills needed for in-demand careers and with Madison College to design training programs for those jobs. Participants can earn up to 9 credits; industry recognized certifications; and entree into a high demand career.

For careers that require longer-term training (e.g., from a semester to two-year programs), Long-term Technical Training Programs and Certifications are available for high growth, high wage industries and occupations. The WDBSCW collaborates with Madison College (the region’s community and technical college) and other partners (including employers and employer organizations) to build sector-focused pathways that prepare jobseekers and workers for careers in the region’s driver industry sectors. Career
pathways initiatives in the region’s targeted industry sectors package curricula in sequenced modules that are aligned with stackable credentials and to specific jobs in the sector. Madison College works hard to ensure that training coursework earns credit and is included on students’ transcripts to document progress toward a technical diploma or an applied Associate’s degree. Navigators are provided for students in these longer-term training programs, again paid by the WDB but housed in the college.

The WDBSCW works to expand opportunities for adults and youth to enter into Apprenticeship Training in the region. The board is not only exploring apprenticeships in traditional industry sectors such as construction and manufacturing, but also looking into apprenticeships in nontraditional sectors such as healthcare. The establishment of apprenticeship navigators will assist with participant access.

The WDB also invests in Career Pathways for Youth. The WDB is working with a series of youth-serving organizations (including community-based organizations), the K-12 education system, postsecondary institutions, and employers to perfect its approach for serving youth in South Central Wisconsin. For both in-school and out-of-school participants, the WDBSCW has determined that youth-serving programs will be built on the career pathways framework, supporting the broader talent development system.

WDBSCW’s Youth Pathways Model

For in-school students, the WDB is expanding career pathways opportunities for the region’s secondary students through its Middle College initiative—a partnership with area high schools and community and technical colleges. Through this dual credit career pathway program, students interested in advancing their education in targeted (driver) industry sectors achieve “college status” at the Madison College or Moraine Park Technical College campuses in health care, manufacturing or culinary arts during the regular school year. Each track allows students to take college classes as they work to complete their high school graduation requirements. Students may earn up to 30 free college credits toward an industry-recognized, postsecondary credential upon successful completion of Middle College. Local companies partner with the WDC to host Middle College students for paid summer work experiences. The WDB and the Madison School District partner with the Pathways to Prosperity network to expand this focus on career pathways in the region’s K-12 system where beginning in 9th grade, students in the Madison school district are offered
opportunities to participate in career pathways through postsecondary credential attainment in a wider range of industry sectors. By 2022 the region plans to have “wall-to-wall career pathways” built out in the Madison school district -- available to all students who wish to participate in such programs of study.

The WDCSCW is also partnering to establish comprehensive career pathways opportunities for out-of-school youth. Early in its development the new system will provide outreach, triage (assessment) and transition assistance to out-of-school youth, engaging them in meaningful activities and relationships before they are fully independent where possible. Out-of-school youth will be engaged in the technical college’s high diploma recovery program. College-based training navigators will work aggressively to provide counseling, support services, and will work with financial aid offices and human services programs to help participants access all resources that are available to them. In addition to supports and counseling, participants will be provided with a robust suite of Career Services – including opportunities to participate in short-term (academies) and long-term education and training programs that are part of the career pathways system with the goals of credential attainment and employment in family supporting careers.

Recognizing WIOA’s emphasis on more comprehensive and integrated service delivery, and having seen the potential that can come from the alignment of career pathways and sector strategies for addressing the needs of businesses and workers, the WDBSCW is committed to continuing to invest in these strategies. As described in their plan, “The expansion of sector strategies must continue in order to enhance and strengthen Wisconsin’s economic vitality through addressing employer and job-seeker talent requirements. Sector partnerships implement effective coordinated responses and integrate resources to develop the talent and workforce needs of key industries of a regional labor market...Sector partnerships must be closely aligned with the education system to develop flexible and responsive career pathways.”

CONCLUSION

Sector and career pathways approaches are mutually beneficial systems change strategies designed to: improve the relevance and effectiveness of education and training programs; meet the skill needs of in-demand industries; and prepare workers with the competencies and credentials needed for family supporting careers in targeted industries and occupations. Successful sector approaches and industry partnerships require changes in the behavior of businesses and employers; and in the organization and delivery of workforce, education, and training systems that are well met through career pathways approaches. Career pathways respond to the skill requirements of in-demand industry sectors and employers; and to the education and skill needs of a wide range of individuals – students, jobseekers and workers – including those with barriers to education and employment. WIOA makes it clear that all workforce systems across the country must develop and align sector strategies and career pathways approaches as a new way of doing business – transforming the organization and delivery of services throughout the workforce development system. Establishing sector-focused career pathways holds great potential for strategically meeting the skill needs of: America’s workers as they prepare for high demand, family supporting careers; employers in high demand industry sectors; and regional economies.
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