



Building Career Pathways For Young People

AN ASSESSMENT OF EVIDENCE AND OPPORTUNITIES

Executive Summary

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PROJECT
EVIDENT

Authors

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Executive Summary

As the value of postsecondary education and training in the labor market has increased, the economic gap between workers with postsecondary education and those without has widened. A growing number of states and organizations are adopting “career pathways” approaches to support economic mobility for students and learners. Pathways is defined by a structured sequence of education, training, employment, and other services designed to help people enter and advance in industries with high demand for skills. Specifics of pathways programs and practices vary widely across states, education and workforce systems, and organizations.

In the fall of 2024, Project Evident conducted an evidence review to understand the knowledge gaps around building successful career pathways for young people under 25. The goals were to take stock of existing research evidence and identify gaps that need to be filled to support effective and equitable pathways at scale.

The assessment combined an extensive review of research literature with interviews with more than 40 researchers and practitioners to surface key evidence gaps. The evidence review included in-school and out-of-school programs that seek to improve career-related outcomes for young people in K-12, postsecondary education, and workforce programs.

Current State of Evidence

Middle School	Efforts to expand career exploration and exposure to career-technical education (CTE) have increased in recent years, but research on outcomes, implementation, cost, and sustainability is limited.
High School	A growing body of evidence strongly suggests that CTE participation in high school can improve high school performance and completion, and chances of employment with higher earnings after high school. Strongest evidence is for intensive, multi-faceted programs and whole-school approaches.
Post-secondary and workforce	Strongest evidence of long-term economic impact for young people is limited to a small number of sector-based programs. On average, a non-degree credential is associated with higher earnings, but there is significant variation in returns by field of study and demographics. Disparities in outcomes for different credentials in different fields are not well understood. Programs for high-wage, high-growth occupations have high barriers to entry and success for young people who leave high school without a diploma or those who face severe life challenges.



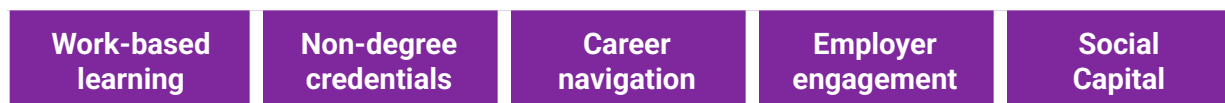
Summary of Evidence Gaps

The scan highlighted common evidence gaps across systems and programs that span a young person’s trajectory. These include the following:

Outcomes for youth under 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longitudinal research on education and labor market trajectory and outcomes, including evidence of economic advancement • Research on causal impact of programs and practices
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disaggregated evidence for different groups (including by race/ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status, and geography) • Research on improving access to high-return pathways for young people with high needs and barriers • Understanding of factors that affect disparities in access and outcomes, including programmatic factors that influence youth choices
Cost-benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return-on-investment (ROI) for employer participation • Cost-benefit assessments from a societal perspective • Return on non-degree credentials for different groups in different fields
Scale, Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actionable evidence to guide design, implementation, and scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How specific program components and practices drive outcomes ○ How context and capacity drive implementation and outcomes (such as policy and funding, community and labor market characteristics, staffing and partnerships, etc.) ○ How to improve alignment between supply of programs and credentials and labor market demand • Research on impact of policy and systems change efforts

Key Areas of Evidence Gaps Across Systems

The literature review and interviews for the scan highlighted evidence gaps in five key areas that are relevant to different systems and programs across a young person’s career pathway.



1. Work-Based Learning

A body of evidence from European countries shows that work-based learning programs, including high school apprenticeships, can have a positive effect on labor market outcomes. But research on how work-based learning in the United States affects outcomes for youth under 25 is very limited. Strongest evidence of labor market gains comes from the registered apprenticeship program, which does not specifically seek to serve young people but has seen significant growth in participation by young people in recent years. There is emerging evidence that youth-focused apprenticeships may help with positive transitions to college and work after high school. Work-based learning is also a key component of successful high school CTE and sector-based programs, but there are gaps in our understanding of what makes them effective.

2. Non-Degree Credentials

There is a plethora of non-degree credentials available in the market at the secondary and postsecondary level. This includes certificates issued by colleges, credentials awarded by professional associations or industry groups, licenses awarded by government agencies, digital badges and microcredentials, among others. Navigating this landscape has become increasingly more complex for young people, and there are big gaps in evidence around the comparative value of different credentials in different fields and for different groups.

3. Employer Engagement

Strong employer engagement is a core component of a career pathways approach, and evidence suggests that it is perhaps the most challenging to implement. There is limited research on effective strategies to develop and sustain productive employer partnerships for pathways programs at scale, and research on how different types or intensity of employer engagement drive youth outcomes is limited. There are big gaps in evidence around effective use of financial and policy incentives to engage employers; models for training and supporting employers to engage young people in productive work-based learning; demonstrating the value proposition or ROI for participating in training and work-based learning; and strategies to engage employers in improving job quality and supporting workplace advancement.

4. Career Navigation

A core principle of the career pathways approach is that an individual should be able to sequence a series of education and work experiences at different stages of their lives to build skills that are in demand and advance their economic prospects. But there is very little evidence on how to help young people do this effectively in our fragmented education and workforce landscape, especially around advancement. Many programs offer career advising and transition support, but research on how these services support outcomes is limited. As artificial intelligence (AI) brings rapid shifts in the labor market and the number of credentials multiply, increased support to help young people build navigation skills and provide them with tools to



make effective choices is of utmost importance. There is great need to build evidence for what an integrated, cross-system approach to career navigation could look like, especially one that can effectively support transitions and advancement and foster youth agency and skills to navigate pathways.

5. Social Capital

There is emerging evidence that social capital – or the benefits and resources one can obtain through their social networks and interpersonal connections – plays an important role in academic success and economic advancement. Recent research shows that “economic connectedness” – or having friends in higher socioeconomic strata – is a strong predictor of upward mobility. Many career pathway programs incorporate practices to help young people build networks and connections, but their implementation or outcomes are not measured. More evidence is needed to understand how programs and institutions can help young people develop different types of social ties or expand their network for the benefit of their career aspirations.

How Funders Can Help Bridge Career Pathways Evidence Gaps

Young people need a continuum of developmentally appropriate supports that help them progressively advance their knowledge, skills, and experiences at different stages of adolescence and adulthood. Those that face challenges due to poverty, social inequality, or personal trauma need additional supports to stay on a positive trajectory. A lot of progress has been made in recent years in advancing the evidence base for a career pathways approach, but significant gaps remain in our understanding of what works for whom in creating pathways to mobility and wellbeing for young people.

The evidence gaps, however, do not mean that “nothing works.” There is rigorous evidence that programs that take a comprehensive approach to developing and supporting young people, in strong partnership with employers, can produce outcomes for young people. But education and workforce development policy and funding generally do not support quality implementation of evidence-based models and practices at scale. Moreover, investments in program innovations and expansions are frequently not accompanied by investments in evidence building and learning.

Below are some key ways in which funders of career pathways programs and research can help bridge the evidence gaps discussed in this report.

1. Build alignment around outcomes, incentives, and language

Programs and initiatives in the pathways space are fragmented across K-12, higher education, and workforce systems, and outcome expectations and incentives are commonly misaligned. Misalignment in outcome goals affects programs and evidence building in several ways –



creating challenges in defining success, designing services, and determining what to measure. In addition, lack of consistent terminology and shared definitions in the field around programs and practices – such as dual enrollment, work-based learning, earn-and-learn, or even career pathways – can be a big obstacle to developing a cohesive body of knowledge.

Funders can lead efforts to build alignment on goals and definitions of career pathways programs and practices that aim to create a common understanding and language in the field. This can include a shared framework designed collaboratively with youth, practitioners, employers, and researchers, as well as activities to incentivize and encourage its adoption.

2. Test innovations in career exploration, navigation, and advancement

Many career pathways programs help people enter specific sectors or occupations, but there is very limited evidence on exploration opportunities or navigation supports that can help students choose pathways that are right for them and that can help them advance in their career. Current funding and policy practices often prioritize metrics around quantity (like numbers served) and immediate outcomes (like job placement in specific sectors), and do not sufficiently incentivize supports for career exploration, navigation of career choices, or navigation of transitions or advancement. As such, expectations of long-term outcomes are not always backed by resources and services that may be required to produce those outcomes.

Funders can work with practitioners, youth, employers, and researchers to test practices and innovations that promote effective career exploration, navigation, and advancement practices. This will need to include efforts to create a shared understanding of success and metrics related to proximal and long-term outcomes, as well as a framework and secure apparatus to incentivize employer data sharing.

3. Mobilize employers to advance evidence on work-based learning and job quality

Evidence suggests that the availability and quality of work-based learning connected to career pathways vary widely, and a substantial share of middle-skill jobs that require some postsecondary education or credential below a four-year degree do not pay a family-sustaining wage or support advancement. Stronger, large-scale employer engagement is key to improving the availability and quality of work-based learning, as well as the quality of early career, middle-skills jobs in different industries.

Funders can mobilize employers in different fields to expand access to work-based learning opportunities and improve the quality of early career work. This will need to include efforts to incentivize employers to participate in data collection, evaluation, and learning activities that can help bolster the evidence base, including a collaborative framework and secure data-sharing apparatus.



4. Support a holistic approach to building evidence

The assessment highlighted that systemic changes are necessary to the way we fund, build and share evidence. There was a high level of alignment among researchers and practitioners interviewed for this assessment around the need to augment quantitative evaluations of outcomes with other types of research that can contextualize the results, explain the mechanisms that affect those outcomes, and produce actionable evidence for future strategy, practice, and policy.

Funders can embrace a broader range of methodologies and research practices to meet the evidence gaps surfaced in this report.

They can:

- Incentivize innovations in causal research and the advancement of quasi-experimental methods
- Prioritize outcome-focused implementation and cost research that can inform policy and practice
- Build practitioner capacity for data use and evidence building for timely improvements
- Incentivize youth and practitioner engagement in evidence-building activities
- Invest in communication and learning activities to bridge the evidence-to-practice gap
- Invest in research to assess the impact of policy and systems-level changes
- Help address data barriers to longitudinal tracking of outcomes
- Incentivize more inclusive and expansive measures of success and youth development

A more holistic approach to evidence building – that is centered on meeting the needs of young people and enabling practitioners who serve them – can help researchers, practitioners and funders produce timely knowledge that effectively informs policy and practice in the evolving labor market.

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