Career Pathways:  
An Overview & Best Practices  
Compiled by Portland Community College

What is a Career Pathway?

A Career Pathway is a series of connected or “chunked” education courses with internship work experience and enhanced student services that enable students to take advantage of the “window of opportunity” of Training Unemployment Insurance (TUI) to upgrade their skills and to combine school and work to advance over time to better jobs and higher levels of education and training.

Career Pathways target jobs critical to the local economy. They are designed to create educational “stepping stones” for advancement of workers and job seekers, particularly those stuck in low-wage jobs, and a supply of qualified workers for employers. As such, career pathways help ensure that investment in education and training pays off in enhanced economic development.

Features of a career pathway include:

- **“bridge” programs** that prepare educationally disadvantaged students to enter credit-based academic courses often by teaching developmental or basic skills in the context of occupational skills
- **“chunked” curriculum** where certificate and degree coursework is grouped into smaller sets of courses that can be taken in one to two terms that prepare students for a discrete occupation leading to their career and educational goal
- **“roadmaps”** that graphically outline the “ladder” for an occupation or career and identify the courses and curriculum “chunks” needed for career advancement showing the connections between education and training programs and jobs in a given industry or sector
- **enhanced “wrap-around” student services** that including career assessment, advising, and tutoring to enhance student success as well as job search skills training and job placement assistance
- **credentials** for specific occupations, such as “Employment Skills Training” (EST) certificates, that inform employers’ of a student skills and provide for easy articulation of credits across programs and educational institutions
- **conveniently scheduled and sequenced classes** to meet the needs of working adults
- **outreach** to community-based organizations and other groups that serve students underrepresented in higher education.
Career Pathway benefits include:

**Access for all students, regardless of educational or skill level:** For example, English language learners will have access to coursework that will help them prepare for jobs as technicians in the microelectronics industry, as will college graduates recently laid off from the sales jobs they held for many years, as will high school seniors.

**Multiple entry and exit points tied to jobs:** Fewer students are using the community college as a link in a linear educational pipeline where they move from high school diploma to associate’s degree to bachelor’s degree to work. As more and more students are blending education and work or returning to school after periods of no school, just work, they are accessing education as a cycle. Students frequently enroll in college to take only the classes they need to get a job, returning for more classes when they want a better job, and so on. Yet they are often unclear about which courses lead to which jobs. By “chunking” the curriculum into sets of courses with discrete employment outcomes, students will be able to enter and exit a degree or certificate program at clear, but various, points in their educational cycle rather than completing the entire program at once.

**Linked to employer needs:** The determination of which courses are grouped together is based on current and ongoing labor market analysis of employer demand and research on the skill sets business requires for various jobs within an industry. Ability to offer an employer recognized credential for less than 1-year or 2-year program.

**Uses existing curriculum to build toward degree completion:** In the past, many job seekers have built their basic or occupational skills through non-credit offerings. When they want to enroll in a certificate program, or take a few courses of a degree program, they find that none of the classes they took before count toward their academic goal. A career pathways system integrates non-credit and existing credit courses to create a seamless system for students to move from pre-college to credited academic programs.

**Easily understandable:** The college catalog is impressive, but overwhelming to most students and many staff. The development of “roadmaps” which graphically show the various routes a student can take to achieve employment outcomes makes the alternatives clear to both staff and students.

**Meets students’ life needs:** Students need educational options that allow them to blend work, family responsibilities, and school. Career pathways recognize that a high percentage of community college students work by providing more delivery options (distance education, weekend college) as well as repackaging existing two-year curriculum into a logical sequence of shorter options. Pathways also provide the “wrap-around” student services that enhance student planning and informed decision-making and increase student success in achieving both academic and employment goals.

**Flexibility:** Integral to the career pathways system is a “rolling” or continuous improvement research and development design. This makes the system adaptable to changes in the labor market and feedback from students, staff and business about appropriate skill sets, employment outcomes, and curriculum delivery.
REPORTS

Building a Career Pathways System, Executive Summary
Building a Career Pathways System (unabridged report)
Workforce Strategy Center
August 2002

Building Bridges to College and Career
Workforce Strategy Center
January 2003

Building a Career Pathway System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development
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Whose Job Is It? Creating Opportunities for Low Income Adults to Advance to Better Jobs
Chapter in Workforce Intermediaries for the 21st Century. Editor: Robert Giloth
By Nan Poppe, Julie Strawn and Karin Martinson
Temple University Press, publication forthcoming, 2003

Lessons Learned: The MetLife Foundation Awards
The MetLife Foundation, Richard Kazis, Leslie Haynes, and Martin Liebowitz
January 2002

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MRDC, Jobs for the Future, Richard Kazis, Marty Liebowitz
March 2003

The Potential of Community College As Bridges to Opportunity for the Disadvantages: Can It Be Achieved on a Large Scale?
Davis Jenkins
University of Illinois at Chicago
March 2003

Community Colleges and the Equity Agenda: What the Record Shows
Thomas Bailey, James Jacobs, Davis Jenkins and Tim Leiinbach
Teachers College, Columbia University
April 2003
www.tc.columbia.edu/ccrc
ARTICLES

Credentialing Success Story for Maryland Community Colleges
National Council for Occupational Education, Pat Stanley President of Frederick Community College
Spring 2002

Identifying and Selecting Industry – Validated Occupational Certifications
National Councils for Workforce Education, Rick Spill Director of Special Projects National Skill Standards Boards, Dave Osman Coordinator, NSSB Certification and Apprenticeship Database Project National Skill Standards Board
Summer 2002

On track for good jobs
The Oregonian, Steven Carter
October 2002

Funds, partnerships boost PCC high-tech employment program
Times, Valley Times, Tigard Times
October 2002

Program Promotes Health Jobs
The Oregonian
March 2002

PCC Career Pathways Point the Way to Success
PCC Communities
Winter 2003

PCC Rapid Training Retools Laid Off Workers
PCC Communities
Spring Summer 2002

PCC is Rx For Kaiser Workforce
PCC Communities
Winter 2002

BEST PRACTICES

Cabrillo Community College (Santa Cruz, California)
www.careerladders.net
Career Ladders Project

Central Piedmont Community College (Charlotte, NC)
www.cpcc.cc.nc.us/pathways
Pathways to Employment

LaGuardia Community College (Long Island City, NY)
www.workforcestrategy.org/careerpathways.html
College Opportunity to Prepare for Employment Program

Macomb Community College (Clinton, MI)
www.macomb.cc.mi.us
  MacComb Industrial Network
  Manufacturing Training Institute

Maricopa Community College (Phoenix, Arizona)
www.dist.maricopa.edu/hcies/hcc1.htm
  Health Care Core Courses
  Medical Assistant Information
  Nursing
  Career and Technical Programs

National Retail Federation
www.nrf.com/content/foundation/rcp/main.htm
  Retail Careers, Sales and Service

Portland Community College (Portland, Oregon)
www.pcc.edu/cp
  Career Pathways, Professional Technical Training
  Career Pathways, Vocational Training for Non-Native Speakers

Red River College  (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada)
http://me.rrc.mb.ca/Catalogue
  Software Development Diploma

Sinclair Community College (Dayton, Ohio)
www.sinclair.edu/departments/adult
  Adult Re-entry & Special Programs

Valencia Community College  (Orlando, Florida)
http://wp.valencia.cc.fl.us/aim/aim.htm
  Academics in Motion

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