

Multiple Career Pathways to Family-Sustaining Jobs

An Emerging Framework for Workforce Development Solutions

By Daniel Marschall, PhD
AFL-CIO Working for America Institute
Overview of argument being developed in a policy paper

The nation has reached a turning point in education and skill training policy and practices. A modern labor force characterized by ethnic, gender and demographic diversity requires innovative solutions to realize the employment opportunities of the future. What is emerging? A “multiple career pathways” #mulpath approach to workforce preparation and skill formation.

- Economists studying the labor market – in the shadow of globalization and rapid technological change – have concluded that jobs requiring some post-secondary education and advanced skill training will increase substantially in number and rate of growth in the decades ahead.
- Since the end of World War II, US education and job training policy has been dominated by a four-year-college-for-all mentality. Parents, students and policy-makers accepted the idea that a baccalaureate degree is an essential prerequisite for acquiring a family-sustaining job and achieving a middle-class life style. It became common sense that everyone must aspire to a four-year degree. Ninety-nine percent of high school graduates (2004 survey) expected to go to college.
- That mentality has contributed to baccalaureate and post-graduate education becoming a big business – more than 7,000 institutions with revenues exceeding a half-trillion dollars – with huge salaries drawn by college presidents and super star professors while the majority of the faculty is composed of precarious, underpaid, part-time teachers.
- The credibility of the four-year-college-for-all mentality has broken down. College tuition and fees have increased nearly 800 percent since 1982. The college dropout rate has reached crisis proportions: in the Fall 2008 college cohort, only 55 percent earned a degree in six years. Those who attended some college are mired in \$1.2 trillion of student debt. According to a 2014 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 56 percent of 22-year-old college graduates are underemployed.
- The four-year-college-for-all approach is dysfunctional. It no longer serves the interests of unemployed workers, high road employers, communities, and the generation of young people entering the workforce, especially disadvantaged youth. College graduates, for example, experienced a 2 percent drop in wages between 2007 and 2014.
- Challenging the conventional wisdom is an alternative: the multiple career pathways #mulpath approach. It argues that American workers – young and older, currently unemployed or searching for a job – must have access to a career superhighway (in the words of Sec. of Labor Perez) from a number of on-ramps, including apprenticeship, work-based learning, paid internships, and systematic mentorship and work experience.

The social trend toward multiple career pathways is evident in programs and initiatives that are growing in important spheres of American life and culture.

- The intellectual foundation for the multiple career pathway model has been constructed by credible labor market research and policy reports by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ([Learning for Jobs](#), 2010), Harvard Graduate School of Education ([Pathways to Prosperity](#), 2011), the Center for American Progress ([Let's Get Serious about Our Nation's Human Capital](#), 2012), and Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce ([Career and Technical Education: Five Ways that Pay along the Way to the BA](#), 2012), among others.
- The federal government has adopted a Job-Driven Training framework to guide grant-giving programs and agency initiatives. Government policies highlight the expansion of registered apprenticeship, more assistance to community colleges, upskilling the current workforce, and the utility of sector partnerships, including joint labor-management skill training programs. Passage of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) confirmed these priorities. Federal policies are influencing state and local government action.
- Major foundations are funding aspects of this approach. The Joyce Foundation, for example, has long promoted improving career pathways. The Markle Foundation has devoted \$50 million to their Rework America project to match middle-skill workers to good jobs. Lumina has launched a national conversation on credentialing and funded George Washington University to create a national credential registry.
- Union commitment to the approach is evident. The American Federation of Teachers is deeply involved in modern Career and Technical Education (CTE) in sites such as New York City, where there are 45 CTE schools serving more than 26,000 students. The building and construction trades unions and signatory contractors operate more than 1,900 training centers in the US that invest more than \$1.2 billion annually in apprenticeship and upskilling. Other unions are engaged in joint skill training programs in the auto, steel, aerospace, telecommunications, hospitality, entertainment, health care, and public service industries.
- Business engagement is growing. The National Network of Business and Industry Associations is expanding work-based learning and competency-based apprenticeship. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is calling upon businesses to collaborate with one another to offer more education and training to employees. The National Association of Manufacturers has long promoted a skill certification system. Through efforts such as their P-Tech, IBM and other companies are preparing young people for IT jobs. J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. is investing \$250 million to strengthen and scale leading workforce development programs in selected cities.
- Civil Society Organization are becoming engaged in the [#mulpath](#) campaign. United Way Worldwide has made workforce development part of their policy agenda. Bill Symonds' Global Pathway Institute, in partnership with Arizona State University and others, is helping to create a world-class pathways system. The Hope Street Group is outlining a New American Skills System and its competency-based career path.

A multiple career pathway system is growing in scale and scope. President Obama highlighted a touchstone of this trend in his 2009 State of the Union address: "... tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma."

What will local and state elected officials do to help ensure that all young people and job seekers have the opportunity to pursue quality jobs through multiple career pathways in the years ahead?