

A photograph of two graduates in black caps and gowns. In the foreground, a young woman with long dark hair is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, a young man is also smiling and looking slightly to the side. They are both holding rolled-up diplomas tied with red ribbons.

NASBE

National Association of
State Boards of Education

October 2015

TOWARD A BETTER BALANCE:

BOLSTERING THE SECOND
“C” IN COLLEGE AND
CAREER READINESS

The Report of the NASBE Study
Group on Career Readiness

NASBE gratefully acknowledges the support of the Career Readiness Council for the work of the study group.

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October 2015

TOWARD A BETTER BALANCE: Bolstering the Second “C” in College and Career Readiness

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Group on Career Readiness**

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ABOUT THE STUDY GROUP

In 2015, NASBE launched the Career Readiness Study Group to examine policies and programs designed to prepare students to graduate from high school ready for both college and a career. The study group convened in Washington, DC, in January, March, and June of 2015 to hear from experts and discuss the role of state boards of education in addressing this important issue. The study group also met with NASBE's Career Readiness Council to discuss business and industry perspectives, hosted a webinar in May to learn about state-based efforts, and read extensively on the topic throughout the year. This report details the study group's recommendations for how state boards of education can begin to explore, expand, and enhance career readiness efforts in their states as part of the broader effort to ensure students are prepared for college, careers, and civic life.

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WHY CAREER READINESS?

In recent years, state board of education members from across the country have expressed a growing concern about what lies ahead for students after high school. Are they prepared for postsecondary education? The world of work? To participate in a democracy? To be engaged members of a community? To navigate financial decisions? In short, are they prepared for life?

Answering these questions isn't easy. It's tantamount to a self-evaluation for those charged with overseeing the welfare of the nation's K-12 education system. Yet as data and anecdotal evidence mount, it is clear that policymakers must advance beyond simply repeating the mantra of "college and career readiness for all."

A number of factors are fueling the concern about students' readiness for their next steps after graduation:

- ▶ Employment projections indicate a need for a better educated and more highly skilled workforce. By 2020, the portion of jobs requiring some level of postsecondary education will reach 65 percent, and unless student outcomes in the United States improve significantly, demand will not be met.¹
- ▶ Despite employers' demand for some level of postsecondary education, only 8 out of 10 students graduate from high school on time in the United States. Disaggregating outcomes reveals an even more troubling figure: There is a persistent gap for Hispanic students and black students, who graduate at significantly lower rates than their white peers (73 and 69 percent, respectively, compared with 86 percent for white students).²
- ▶ Among those who graduate from high school, only 66 percent enroll in two- or four-year programs the following fall.³ And, a full 20 percent of those who enroll must take remedial coursework.⁴
- ▶ Only 29 percent of the students at two-year institutions earn a degree or certificate in three years; only 59 percent of students at a four-year institution finish in six years.⁵
- ▶ There is a mismatch between degrees earned and available jobs: A McKinsey study found that across the globe, 75 million young people are unemployed, yet businesses can't find enough skilled

workers to fill openings⁶—a message that business and industry stakeholders have echoed repeatedly in recent years. In another survey of Business Roundtable members, 95 percent indicated a skills shortage within their companies.⁷

Beyond the deficits in the education and workforce pipelines, studies call into question preparedness on a whole range of measures. For many adults in the United States, a long-standing goal of school is to prepare students for citizenship. Yet only 45 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted in 2012, down from 51 percent in the previous presidential election.⁸ Further, among youth with at least some college education, turnout was 66 percent while those with no college experience turned out at a rate of only 35 percent.⁹

Another frequently cited deficit in the wake of the Great Recession is financial literacy. One study found that 18 percent of 15-year-old students could not answer the most basic financial questions.¹⁰ Another study of first-year college students found that financial literacy is actually on the decline for tasks such as paying bills on time, following a budget, or balancing a checkbook.¹¹

The Career Readiness Study Group's conclusion after exploring these and other data points: The lack of readiness for college, careers, and civic life is not a problem that one group of stakeholders can fix, nor will focusing on career readiness alone be sufficient. But neither can these problems sit on the back burner any longer. Better preparing students for their adult lives will require collaboration of a broad spectrum of agencies, organizations, and individuals committed to building an aligned system that supports individuals from cradle to—and through—career. Approaching the problem through the lens of career readiness is by no means a silver bullet, but it offers a fresh perspective on a decades-old strategy that has focused almost exclusively on college preparation—a strategy that is not working for students, teachers, families, or communities.

State boards of education can play a critical role. They can closely examine the foundation upon which the entire education system is built: Are there cracks? Are they significant? Is there a foundation at all? Or is it incomplete? State boards are uniquely positioned to ask questions, to call for a time-out, and to look at the big picture to ensure that policy—big and small—is grounded in preparing students for life. What follows is a set of recommendations and strategies, developed by the study group, that can launch state boards of education into a discussion of these issues.

WHAT CAN STATE BOARDS DO TO ADVANCE CAREER READINESS?

The study group's recommendations are grounded in the premise that college and career readiness requires academic rigor, real-world workplace experiences, and employability skills provided through multiple pathways that allow every student to reach his or her potential. For years now, the phrase “college and career ready” has been used to describe countless reform efforts, reports, studies, and programs, often with little thought given to the second “c”—careers. As the data attest, these efforts have been insufficient. They point to the legitimate need for state policymakers to achieve a better balance by creating a comprehensive infrastructure that supports and values college and career readiness equally.

Build Knowledge and Understanding of Postsecondary, Business, and Workforce Initiatives

Education and workforce systems can sometimes operate in silos in the United States. Take these four major federal education and workforce policies:

- ▶ The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law in 1965, addresses primary and secondary education.
- ▶ The Higher Education Act (HEA), also signed into law in 1965, largely governs federal student aid programs.
- ▶ The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins), first authorized in 1980, focuses on career and technical education (CTE), which can span secondary and postsecondary.
- ▶ The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), first passed in 1988 and replacing the Job Training Partnership Act, addresses workforce development.

Most state board oversight tends to coincide with the policy areas raised in ESEA. A state might have another board to oversee community colleges, another for four-year institutions, perhaps another for CTE, and even more boards for workforce development and labor. Yet the work of all of these boards is inextricably linked

because students may straddle multiple systems or move from one to another—and back again—throughout their lifetimes.

In order to fully achieve college and career readiness for all students, these boards and agencies must do better at aligning their goals and objectives. As a state board member, you can support better alignment by boning up on the roles and authorities of other governing boards, agencies, and stakeholders in your state. If CTE is not housed within the state education agency (SEA), who is charged with administering Perkins? State board members can set up a meeting to learn more. Does your board have a formal connection to the higher education governing board in your state? How are WIOA dollars for youth allocated in your state, and how does that connect with the policies and priorities for other career training initiatives? Building knowledge about the governance structure, policies, programs, and funding—and getting to know the people affiliated with them—is a critical first step to building a comprehensive system that values career readiness.

Further, many state board members spend time in schools and classrooms, observing and meeting teachers and students. In order to better understand what happens to students once they leave high school, it can be just as critical for state board members to observe and interact with systems, organizations, and individuals who focus on postsecondary education and career preparation. During the past year, members of the Career Readiness Study Group spent time in their respective states learning about the many boards and agencies that address career readiness. They forged new relationships, learned about workforce development initiatives, visited manufacturing plants, and explored labor market data—all steps that any state board member can replicate.

Engage with a Broad Spectrum of Stakeholders to Define Career Readiness

Many groups have a stake in college and career readiness. As a result, definitions, goals, and objectives vary from agency to agency, program to program, and even individual to individual. And perspective matters. How a stakeholder in the K-12 system views college and career readiness might be very different from the views of an individual who works for the state's economic development agency, a business executive, or a parent. And while there is a strong base of research and agreement about academic benchmarks, research and practice do not speak so clearly on what it means for a student to be

Box 1. College versus Careers

US policy and practice focus strongly on preparing students to enter four-year degree programs after high school. This dates in part to passage of the GI Bill in 1944, when subsidies expanded access for millions of Americans returning from World War II. College enrollment increased nearly sixfold by 1980. In one generation, public policy—and opinion—coalesced around the idea that a bachelor's degree was a guaranteed ticket to the middle class.

Standards-based reform beginning in the 1980s further entrenched college prep coursework in the American classroom, at a time when vocational education faced a serious image problem. For many years, low-achieving students were tracked into vocational programs, where they were prepared for low-wage jobs with little to no room for career advancement. Even more problematic, the programs did not require these students to complete academic courses needed for entry into college. Despite a shift to a more rigorous framework that combines academic and career coursework, the negative image persists for many parents, policymakers, and even educators. Yet the lines between college ready and career ready are increasingly blurred as evidence mounts that living-wage jobs require postsecondary education.

Source: Draws on Lori Meyer, "Career Readiness: Bridging the Gap between Education and Workforce Preparation," *Policy Priorities* 20, no. 3 (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, fall 2014), <http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/policy-priorities/vol20/num03/toc.aspx>. Copyright 2014, ASCD. Reprinted with permission. Learn more about ASCD at www.ascd.org.

prepared for the workplace. Combining the two terms together under one rhetorical umbrella has added confusion for stakeholders who are trying to determine whether college ready and career ready mean the same thing or something different (box 1).

State definitions reflect this multiplicity of stakeholder perspectives and the knowledge gap. In a 2013 survey of state CTE directors, only 14 reported having a statewide definition of career readiness, but an additional 20 indicated they were developing a definition.¹² A study conducted a year later by another group reported that 32 states had a working definition of college and career readiness.¹³ A third study, published in 2013, found that all but one state had a definition, most often defined as prepared for success in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses.¹⁴

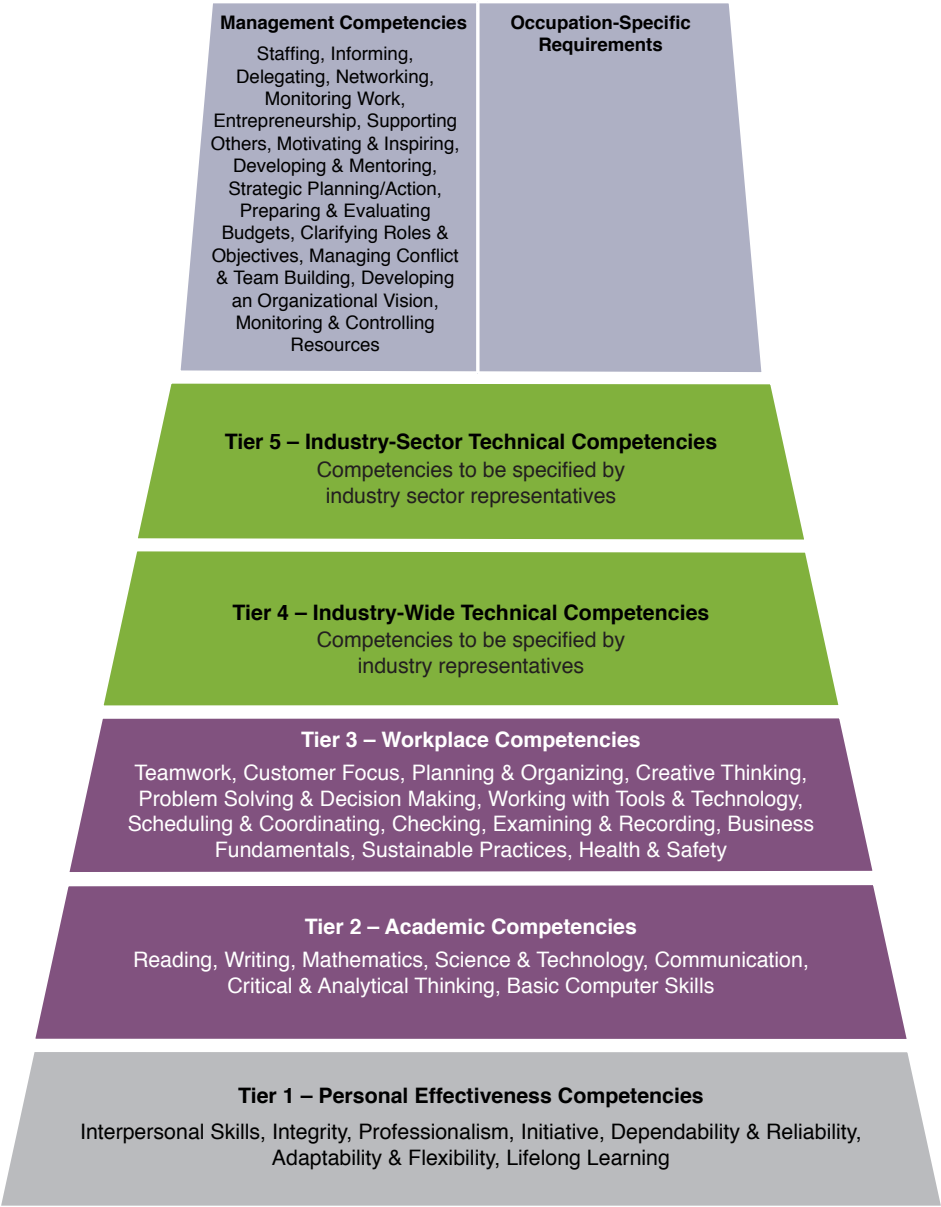
Part of the confusion stems from too many states using the label college and career ready to describe reform efforts without much debate about what it meant. They simply tacked the career label onto benchmarks for college readiness. States did so with good intentions, as part of broader efforts to make the education system more equitable and rectify decades of tracking poor students and students of color into vocational education programs while middle- and upper-income (and mostly white) peers were tracked into college prep coursework. Yet without a clear understanding and agreement about what career readiness means, many state policies and programs are not advancing in the direction of college and career readiness for all. Rather, states' attention is focused on a shortsighted race with college acceptance as the finish line.

Among the states and national organizations that have developed definitions that address career readiness specifically, there are generally two approaches: those that include technical knowledge and skills and those that do not. Two other common elements are academic knowledge and skills and workplace knowledge, skills, and dispositions (sometimes referred to as lifelong learning skills, soft skills, or 21st century skills; also see figure 1).¹⁵

Given the lack of clarity about what it means to be college *and* career ready, the study group members concluded that defining the terms is a critical step for states in order to ensure rigor, equity, and alignment.

If feasible, the definition should be developed collaboratively by a broad range of stakeholders: K-12, postsecondary, workforce,

Figure 1. Foundational Knowledge and Skills for the Workplace



Source: US Department of Labor. The model is based on a review of 22 industry models.

business, and industry representatives (one effort is represented in box 2). A collaborative process can help to align goals and objectives across systems and agencies, particularly if involved stakeholders agree to adopt the definition for use within their respective agencies and organizations. For state boards, a definition can guide policy toward a common goal.

Who leads the process of developing a definition will vary from one state to the next. Perhaps this conversation is already under way and a state board of education member participates as part of an effort led by another stakeholder group. Perhaps another agency or the governor already gathered stakeholders to define college and career readiness but failed to include the state board. Perhaps defining college and career readiness has not made it to the top of the agenda, and your board decides to make it a priority and take the lead in bringing together stakeholders. Regardless of how it happens, start by focusing on making sure it happens in the first place and that the state board of education has a seat at the table.

Box 2. What It Means to Be Career Ready

“A career-ready person effectively navigates pathways that connect education and employment to achieve a fulfilling, financially secure, and successful career. A career is more than just a job. Career readiness has no defined endpoint. To be career ready in our ever-changing global economy requires adaptability and a commitment to lifelong learning, along with mastery of key knowledge, skills, and dispositions that vary from one career to another and change over time as a person progresses along a developmental continuum.... These include both academic and technical knowledge and skills and employability knowledge, skills, and dispositions.”

—From “Building Blocks for Change: What It Means to Be Career Ready,” on the website of the Career Readiness Partner Council, a broad-based coalition of education, policy, business, and philanthropic organizations that was formed in 2012.

Ensure State Board Policies Value Career Readiness

In each state, a host of policies and programs are in place to address career readiness: from the broad, symbolic “college and career” nomenclature that every state uses to policies that hone in on standards, graduation requirements, and career-focused programs such as CTE. Unfortunately, career readiness in most states is addressed in a patchwork quilt that often reaches only a small subset of students. This subset might include juniors and seniors who are participating in a career academy within a comprehensive high school, a one-off event such as a career fair, or an after-school activity or club. In stark contrast, the college prep curriculum touches all students, from the minute they arrive at school until they depart for home. What follows is a brief overview of four areas in which state boards of education tend to have authority; these areas can provide a starting point for examining career readiness through a policy lens.

Standards. The degree to which education standards address career readiness is up for debate, in part because the foundational work to define career readiness hasn’t been done. Again, while most standards are pitched as being focused on “college and career,” there is little to no evidence of attention to much beyond college preparation. Most states revised their academic standards for English/language arts and mathematics in the last five years in an effort to better align student learning to the demands of college and the workplace. Other academic subjects followed suit, including science. However, questions remain about whether the standards adequately address the “soft” skills that often serve as a bridge between academic and technical content: communications, teamwork, and critical thinking skills, for example. CTE standards have also been updated in recent years, in part to reflect the demands of the 21st century work place but also to better align with the newly revised academic content standards. The CTE standards include academic, technical, and workplace components for career pathways but generally apply to a small subset of students who self-select as CTE concentrators (meaning they earned four or more technical credits in a career area).

While most state boards have the authority for their state’s academic learning standards, many also have either total or joint authority for their states’ CTE learning standards (see map), thus opening the door for state boards to approach the broader issue of career readiness more holistically.

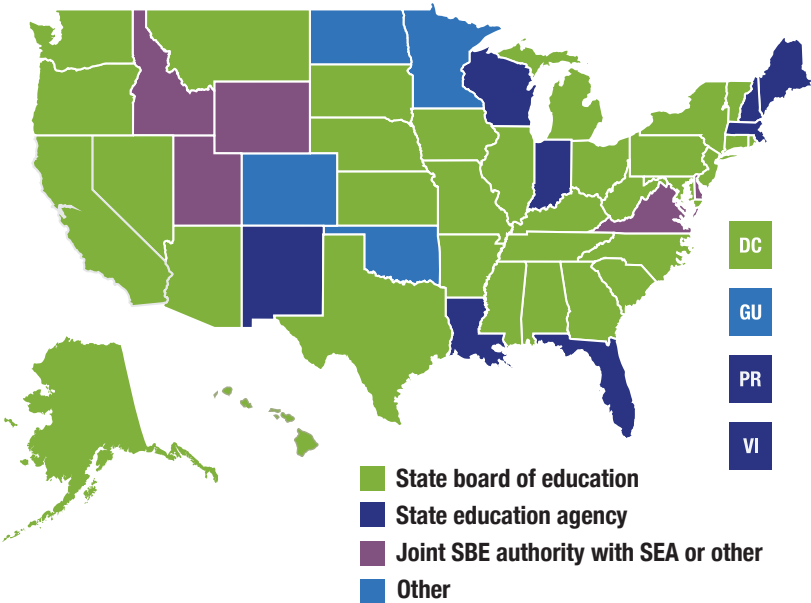
Should every state jump to using CTE standards for all high school students? Not necessarily. Do the academic standards that many states have developed in recent years address career readiness? Again, not necessarily. What a state board can do is to define college and career readiness and make sure the standards align to that definition. Standards drive what students learn in the classroom. If the standards don't address career readiness, then chances are students aren't learning about career readiness.

Assessments. On the assessment front, state policy and practice run the gamut. States have a long history of assessing academic knowledge, but when it comes to technical and employability knowledge and skills, the state of the states is less clear, both in terms of what is tested, who is being tested, and for what purpose. What is clear: Career readiness testing is much more decentralized than academic testing and varies greatly from one district to the next.¹⁶ The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced), the American Institutes for Research, and others vie for state contracts to assess core academic subject knowledge for students. States and districts gauge workplace readiness for some, but usually not all, students through exams such as ACT's WorkKeys. (Only four states require all students to take the exam.¹⁷) Finally, states and school districts also use an almost endless number of industry-based or certification exams, primarily for CTE concentrators.

Armed with a state definition of college and career readiness, coupled with a strong understanding of how state standards align to that definition, state board members can begin to see the landscape of career readiness assessment in their state. What career readiness assessments does your state administer? Who takes the tests and when, and what are the results used for? There is no consensus on what career readiness assessment should look like, particularly if all students are to be tested. Most American students are not exposed to much if any career readiness testing.¹⁸ What is tested tends to be what is taught, so examining assessment will be critical if there is to be significant progress in valuing career readiness.

Accountability. How the results are used varies as much as the assessments themselves. A 50-state analysis found that most states do not value both college and career readiness equally in their accountability systems.¹⁹ When career readiness is included, it is

State Authority for CTE Standards



Source: National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, “The State of Career Technical Education: An Analysis of State CTE Standards,” 2013.

often limited to CTE concentrators and only to meet federal reporting requirements. Graduation requirements also fail to value career readiness. Requirements are still centered on Carnegie units and emphasize academic courses (English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies), although many require a unit of CTE.²⁰ How are career-focused indicators included in your state? Are career readiness measures included in public reporting, such as report cards?

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development. Who leads classroom instruction is perhaps the least studied aspect of career readiness. Exploration of teacher training, professional development, and regulations tends to focus on academic content knowledge and pedagogy skills. The limited number of reports that explore the topic do so through a CTE lens, which can offer valuable insight but is not sufficient if the goal is to ensure that all students are career ready. Core academic subject teachers tend to have content expertise and

often pedagogy skills, whereas CTE teachers tend to have workplace experience, technical knowledge, and an understanding of how to apply academic content in a work setting.²¹ College and career readiness instruction requires a hybrid: teachers who merge the best of academic and technical knowledge with 21st century skills and application of the content in real-world work situations.

Other Ways Career Readiness Is Valued. Standards, assessment, accountability, and teacher certification and professional development are the bread and butter of state board work. But there are other ways that career readiness can be addressed, such as through local nonprofit programs, private grants, partnerships with business and industry, after-school activities, and classroom practice that stretches the boundaries of the traditional lecture model of teaching. More often, these activities fall outside the direct authority of state boards, but members should be knowledgeable about the variety of ways that career readiness is being addressed throughout the state and ensure that state policy does not create barriers to successful implementation. These activities might include work-based learning experiences gained during the school day, before, or after; project-based learning; teacher externships at local businesses; and a public/private partnership between a local school district, the neighboring community college, and a regional business.

A Holistic Approach. The study group concluded that state board members should closely examine state policies to determine the degree to which career readiness is addressed. Members should have a firm grasp of the policies that fall within the K-12 realm, which might be more expansive than standards, assessment, accountability, and teacher training.

Explore the major areas for which your state board has authority: Do standards include workplace readiness measures or technical knowledge and skills for all students? How is career readiness assessed? Do all students have the opportunity to be tested? Is career readiness part of the state's accountability formula?

The ultimate goal is to create a comprehensive, aligned policy strategy for college and career readiness, but a critical first step is evaluating what's already in place and why. Once a board has a firm grasp on the degree to which career readiness is addressed in state policy, it can then begin the task of determining what needs to change and how.

LOOKING AHEAD

At the final meeting of the study group in June, members urged NASBE to continue to delve further into the topic of career readiness. Unlike some topics, the career readiness landscape is vast and still in its infancy when compared with the understanding of college readiness. The study group concluded their deliberations with a request to state board members to take the long view. Discrete quick-fix policies will not help the nation's youth achieve college, career, and civic readiness. State boards of education are well positioned to promote a vision for education that values all of these elements and looks beyond college entrance as the end goal.

RESOURCES

The Career Readiness Study Group heard from many experts and read extensively on the topic. In addition to the references listed throughout the report, presenters and members of the study shared a number of resources they believe state boards will find useful:

Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success (ACES) is a collaborative effort between Montgomery College, Montgomery County Public Schools, and the Universities at Shady Grove to support students and provide a seamless path to a bachelor's degree.

ACT, a nonprofit that offers the college admissions and placement test of the same name to high school students, also provides assessment, research, information, and program management services to the education and workforce development fields. One such resource is their report *Building a Common Language for Career Readiness and Success: A Foundational Competency Framework for Employers and Educators*.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those who are traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. The Alliance offers federal policy updates and analyses on issues related to college and career readiness in secondary schools.

The **Association of Career and Technical Education (ACTE)** is the largest national education association dedicated to preparing youth and adults for careers. The National Association of State Directors of Career

Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) represents the state and territory heads of secondary, postsecondary, and adult CTE. Both organizations offer a host of resources on CTE programs and funding, as well as federal and state policy.

The Center for Education and Workforce, housed within the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation Center, mobilizes the business community to be more engaged partners and to challenge the status quo. It connects education and workforce reforms to economic development. The center offers a host of resources on the skills gap.

ConnectEd: The California Center for College & Career is dedicated to advancing practice, policy, and research aimed at helping young people prepare for both college and careers through Linked Learning—a high school improvement approach.

The Connecticut Technical High School System recently released a strategic plan that emphasized academic, structural, and economic areas called Tomorrow's Framework.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five US extrastate jurisdictions. CCSSO released a report and launched an initiative in late 2014 focused on career readiness, *Opportunities and Options: Making Career Preparation Work for Students*.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS), tracks state policy trends, translates academic research, provides unbiased advice, and creates opportunities for state leaders to learn from one another. ECS provides an online, 50-state policy database on a range of topics related to college and career readiness.

The Guam Department of Education initiates career readiness efforts beginning in elementary schools with career fairs, portfolios, and hands-on STEM activities.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) designs and drives the adoption of innovative and scalable education and career training models and systems that lead from college readiness to career advancement and also develops and advocates for the federal and state policies needed to support these solutions. JFF is spearheading several work readiness initiatives, including Pathways to Prosperity.

Junior Achievement USA (JA) is the world's largest organization dedicated to educating students about workforce readiness,

entrepreneurship, and financial literacy through experiential, hands-on programs.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) works to improve the lives of the one in five children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. NCLD works to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social, and emotional skills needed to succeed in school, work, and life. It offers a number of resources, including a study focused on how students feel about their journey before and after high school.

The National Skills Coalition is a broad-based coalition working toward a vision of an America that grows its economy by investing in its people so that every worker and every industry has the skills to compete and prosper. The organization focuses on advancing state and federal policies that support these goals and offers a wealth of resources on WIOA and other career-related legislation and funding.

Nebraska's Career Education Model promotes a vision for college and career readiness.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) works with 16 member states to improve public education at every level, from pre-K through Ph.D. SREB has a long history of working with states on career readiness and CTE initiatives.

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15. Sometimes different stakeholders use different terms. It can be confusing even for the most adept education policy professionals. Find out which terms are used in your state, what each term means, and in what context each is used.
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NASBE is a nonprofit, private association that represents state and territorial boards of education. Its principal objectives are to strengthen state leadership in education policymaking, promote excellence in the education of all students, advocate equality of access to educational opportunity, and ensure continued citizen support for public education.