COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

REPORT

Expanding Postsecondary Pathways to Strengthen Texas' Workforce

Strengthening national security and Texas' workforce with postsecondary learning that prioritizes quality credentials and affordability for all



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

ReadyNation | Business. Kids. Workforce.
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Mission: Readiness
Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

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Summary

Texas boasts the second-largest economy in the United States and, with an economic output of $1.7 trillion in 2017, was ranked as the tenth-largest economy in the world.[1] As of December 2021, there were 14 million civilians in Texas' workforce, and its economy is still growing.[2] By 2028, Texas expects to create 1.7 million new jobs[3] and faces a pressing need to equip individuals with the skills and credentials they will need to succeed in the workforce. A well-educated, well-credentialed workforce is vital to supporting Texas' growing economy. Having access to postsecondary education and training can also help prepare Texas students for military service, if they so choose. Improving the postsecondary pathway in Texas will prepare students today with the skills and experiences they need to succeed in the workforce tomorrow.

Training students for the future workforce

By 2030, 60 percent of our state's jobs will require postsecondary education.[4] As of 2020, only 42 percent of Texans between the ages of 25 and 34 had an associate degree or higher, leaving a skills gap of 18 percent.[5] Texas is making progress towards increasing educational attainment, but still lags when compared to the national average of 52 percent.[6]

Strengthening our nation through postsecondary education

Our nation's military faces a skills gap similar to the one faced by the business community. In Texas, 73 percent of young people are ineligible to serve in uniform due to three main disqualifiers, one of which is poor academics.[7] Home to 15 military bases, our state needs more eligible, educated youth who are ready

to help solve the challenges of the future by serving the nation in the military.[8]

Military service has long allowed Americans to access GI benefits, making college, apprenticeships, or job training more accessible. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, 600,000 veterans across the country used their education benefits in FY2017.[9]

As of FY2017, Texas was home to over 1.5 million veterans. Of these individuals, over 96,000 (six percent) were GI beneficiaries, and 30 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher.[10] The Department of Veterans' Affairs projects that by FY2045, there will still be over a million veterans living in Texas, many of whom are likely to use their educational benefits to update their skills and then further contribute to our state's economy.[11]

Programs covered by GI benefits should recognize students' past learning experiences as a valuable contribution to their current educational goals. Service members who completed more specialized military training should be permitted to leverage that service to obtain civilian licensure or certification in those areas.[12]

Expanding postsecondary opportunities for students

Since 2009, Texas has improved its overall rate of educational attainment by nearly 15 percentage points, but more progress needs to be made to ensure our workers are competitive, and businesses can find skilled employees.[13] Across our state, postsecondary institutions provide the education credentials and skills that prepare students for careers in Texas' top-performing industries, such as advanced manufacturing, aerospace, defense, energy, and biotechnology.[14] For the Texas workforce to be competitive, it is vital that the state invest in steady pipelines of top talent, starting with reaching students in high school to prepare them for success in postsecondary education and in the workforce. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has determined four goals to help create opportunities for postsecondary education in our state, and prepare Texas' students for successful futures.

Four goals to improve the postsecondary pathway

1. Increase Texas' educated population
2. Ensure students complete secondary degrees or certification programs
3. Help students develop marketable skills
4. Improve educational affordability and reduce student debt

Goal 1: Increase Texas' educated population

According to the Texas Workforce Commission, individuals with more education are more likely to participate in the labor force. Among those with some college or an associate degree, the unemployment rate is less than seven percent; for those with less than a high school diploma, the rate increases to nearly ten percent.[15] Education can not only reduce unemployment, but can also increase wages. The United States Census Bureau found that there is an annual earnings gap of more than $17,500 between individuals who have completed some college or earned an associate degree, and those who earned a bachelor's degree.[16]

In Texas, only 42 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds held a postsecondary degree or certificate in 2020, placing the state at 36th in the nation for educational attainment.[17] In order to improve educational attainment in Texas, our state must focus on increasing the number of students who receive credentials in Texas, as well increasing the number of those with credentials who move to our state.[18]

Goal 2: Ensure students complete secondary degrees or certification programs

Factors such as curriculum, academic instruction, and performance in high school are strong predictors of college completion for students. Among Texas students who were in the eighth grade in 2006, only 20 percent had graduated from college by 2017.[19] Nearly 40 percent of students entering a public higher education institution in Texas did not meet the college-readiness standards developed by the Texas Success Initiative. Of those students, only 60 percent returned to college for their second year. Comparatively, 83 percent of students who were deemed college-ready upon entering college returned after their freshman year.[20] Students who are not adequately prepared for college may be required to take remedial courses, which are an extra expense and do not earn college credit. This can make progressing toward, and completing, a college degree more difficult and less likely.[21]

In order to improve college completion rates, Texas should work to improve data capacity and data sharing among the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Committee. This can provide actionable information to students and the adults supporting them, and can help to improve the effectiveness of student advising. Additionally, Texas should work to increase appropriations for institutions that serve students of color, and increase funding for need-based financial aid for students.[22]

> “To ensure that students are ready for college, the military, or the workforce, Texas must invest in postsecondary pathways in our state.”



Major General (Ret.) John F. Nichols
U.S. Air Force

Goal 3: Help students develop marketable skills

Marketable skills, such as technical and interpersonal skills, are valuable to employers. Public two- and four-year institutions in Texas must make students aware of the importance of these skills, and enable them to graduate and market themselves to potential employers. By promoting the development of marketable skills in students, Texas’ higher education institutions can produce students who are well-prepared to enter the workforce.[23]

In order to help students develop marketable skills and market themselves to employers, public institutions in Texas must identify which skills are offered in their programs, and effectively communicate that information to students.[24]



Goal 4: Improve educational affordability and reduce student debt

In 2017, tuition for public four-year institutions in Texas averaged $8,375 per year. The cost of four-year colleges can be prohibitive for some students, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, making two-year degree and certificate programs more cost-effective options. These programs can help students develop skills for jobs that do not require a four-year degree, but require education beyond high school. Nearly 60 percent of Texas' workforce in 2017 was made up of these jobs, including licensed practical nurses, police officers, and air traffic controllers.[25]

Community colleges are important providers of two-year degree and certificate programs. During the 2017-18 school year, Texas' public community colleges were ranked fourth in the nation in affordability of two-year degrees; annual tuition and fees cost, on average, $2,209.[26] In order to make higher education more affordable for students, Texas must continue to provide additional funding for community colleges, and continue the partnerships between high schools and colleges to provide opportunities for students to pursue an associate degree while still in high school.

Conclusion

Business and military leaders are united in their concerns regarding our state's future workforce. Public policy can play a key role in ensuring student success by providing affordable educational pathways to all potential students, targeting financial support to encourage both institutions and students to focus on success, and reducing or eliminating barriers that prevent timely progression to credentials.

Texas has a strong record of support for policies that implement learner pathways, including college acceleration, career and technical education for K-12, and outcomes-based funding for technical colleges. As we work to recover from COVID-19's impact on the Texas economy, it is critical that we continue to equip our students with the skills and training they need to succeed in postsecondary education and in the workforce. To meet our 2030 goal of equipping 60 percent of Texans with a high-quality degree or credential, we must continue to build strong pathways from high school to college and career. It will take a team effort from the legislature, schools, and the business community to invest time and resources into expanding high-quality pathways programs in high schools to build the workforce that we need now and in the future.

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