

## CAREER PATHWAYS COLLABORATION IN WISCONSIN

**Scott DuBenske**

Wisconsin Technical College System

**Toni Van Doren**

Nicolet Area Technical College

**Annette Kornell**

Madison College

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) challenged the State of Wisconsin to combine resources and create stronger partnerships, look to labor market data and industry research to determine which skills the workforce needs, and to focus on the creation of a workforce that can meet the expectations of the future economy. Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) already had a strong tradition of utilizing partnerships to support and grow its workforce creating a foundation for implementing WIOA. As the Wisconsin State Leadership team consisting of all four of the WIOA Title partners worked to draft the Wisconsin State Plan, a golden opportunity for alignment was born. This opportunity for alignment was framed within one of the key strategies noted in the WIOA Legislation: Career Pathways.

In 2014, Wisconsin was granted a 4 year, \$4.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor for project work aimed at scaling the state's career pathway system. This project, called Advancing Careers for TAA and Transitioners, or ACT2, is geared toward bringing dedicated and directed cohesion to existing practices and taking career pathway advancement in Wisconsin to greater scale and alignment. The ACT2 framework has illustrated three primary goals for the project:

1. Align career pathway policy between systems
2. Scale career pathways across WTCS districts
3. Incorporate career pathway best practices at WTCS colleges

Goal one points toward system-level activities and outcomes, including by WTCS as well as other state-level partners, such as the Department of Workforce Development (DWD), Department of Public Instruction (DPI), and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC). Goal two points toward college and district level activities and outcomes, including local and regional partnerships between colleges, workforce and economic development organizations, and employers. In order to effectively align policy between systems, Wisconsin would require a unique team of leaders from organizations across the spectrum of WIOA Titles. Through outreach efforts of the ACT2 project team in addition to WTCS System Office, the Wisconsin Pathways Committee was formed. The Wisconsin Pathways Committee (WPC), comprised of many of the same members that had served on the Wisconsin State Leadership

team, operates at the state policy level to bring cohesion and policy alignment to the systems in which career pathway students often navigate. The Wisconsin Pathways Committee is working to further complement the relationship that each of the Wisconsin Technical colleges have with their local and regional employment and economic development partners in order to promote the use of career pathway resources throughout the State of Wisconsin.

In a relatively short time the WPC has adopted a common definition of Career Pathways, planned and supported professional development aimed at members and staff of key organizations, and worked to create alignment within the agencies represented by the WPC members. Of particular note is a recent policy brief developed by members of the WPC with guidance from the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success (CLASP) titled: Expanding the Talent Pipeline Using Career Pathway Strategies. Education, workforce, and economic development professionals across the nation are working with employers to create a robust talent pipeline utilizing career pathways. The Talent Pipeline brief builds on a literature review of the collective experience and a series of collaborative conversations with professionals from Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development (DWD), Workforce Development Boards, Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS), Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), and Wisconsin's Economic Development Corporation (WEDC). The brief intends to offer guidance to practitioners about career pathway strategies they can use to meet employers' needs for skilled employees.

Within each Technical College and Workforce Development district throughout Wisconsin, similar work is being undertaken by regional partners to align systems through collaboration such as sector partnerships. Each of Wisconsin's technical colleges and Workforce Boards maintains a strong commitment to collaboration as evidenced by local and regional activities throughout Wisconsin. Technical colleges including Madison College, Nicolet Area Technical College, and Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College continue to enhance their relationships to the workforce community as WIOA provides further motivation to continue building on a strong foundation of collaboration.

At Madison Area Technical College, Career Pathways provide the structure in which short-term training opportunities are organized and developed in collaboration with their workforce partners. As noted in the 2017 Annual Report of the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin (WDBSCW), the Career Pathways model offers a unified framework that grounds and sustains the work of the Board. Sector and industry partnerships are brought together to address skill shortages and develop training programs in collaboration with the college to develop pipelines of skilled workers.

WIOA outcomes stress employment and providing students the opportunity to gain a credential that leads to employment as efficiently as possible. Well-planned and deliberate curriculum development is central to the student experience on their path to an industry validated credential.

As part of the WTCS approval process for embedded credentials, the entry-level credentials in each pathway are validated by area employers to meet entry-level job requirements for

jobs that are in demand, utilizing WIOA financial resources more effectively. As noted in the WDBSCW 2017 Annual Report, through the career pathways model, “Workers and job seekers have the flexibility to access essential skill-building and support activities at any point in their career pathway.”

The underserved workforce, including those with low income, receiving public assistance, or dislocated, are served through WIOA-funded Academies in collaboration with the WDBSCW. These academies are short-term, cohort-based training programs that focus on high-demand fields. Not only does the student earn a credential leading to an in-demand job opportunity, they also start on a pathway to higher education should they choose to return to school.

Madison College and the WDBSCW collaborate with other partners as well, such as the Urban League, area K-12 school districts, Operation Fresh Start, and the Department of Corrections, to offer programming that meets the needs of diverse student groups. All training programs are developed with input from employer partners to ensure that programs have relevance and employer demand. Employers also collaborate in the student experience through work-based learning experience.

The complex needs of disadvantaged and disconnected youth are served collaboratively by Madison College, WDBSCW, workforce, and community agencies through the Middle College program. WDBSCW’s WIOA funding allows WIOA-eligible youth to begin college while still in high school. Completers of the program earn a college certificate as well as their high school diploma, helping them to attain self-sufficiency and career success. An important component of the program is the collaboration with workforce partners to offer internships for the students. One example of short-term training leading to in-demand employment is within the Construction and Remodeling Technical Diploma offered at Madison College. This 1-year diploma includes 2 embedded and stackable credentials that enable a student to enter the workforce more quickly. The initial entry-level credential, Construction Essentials, can be completed in 8 weeks and includes OSHA 30 Industry Certification, which appeals to a variety of employers. Through experience, additional education, apprenticeship, or some combination of these opportunities, students can attain every increasing level of employment in this field which is #14 on Wisconsin’s High-Demand Jobs list.

Similar to many of the other technical colleges in Wisconsin, Nicolet College enrolls more noncredit than credit students. Much of the growth has occurred in continuing education, professional development, and certification and contract training. These areas, offered by the Workforce & Economic Development team, provide an important role in meeting shifting workforce demands and providing skills in a way that is flexible and responsive to employer needs. One benefit of that programming is the flexibility to quickly meet industry demand. Nicolet has now partnered their Workforce & Economic Development team with credit program faculty to create pathways for these students to gain the deserved recognition of their efforts and show proof that actual learning has taken place.

Nicolet began looking into the benefits of creating non-credit to credit pathways for students during the ACT2 grant period, in which the college made the bold decision to add a

career pathway coordinator position to their staff. One of the key duties of the career pathway coordinator was to attend training sessions as well as meetings regarding the newly updated Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The career pathways coordinator's mission was to analyze the immediate and future needs and trends for the local workforce. In addition, the coordinator would partner with local agencies while continuing to meet goals for pathway creation for incoming and current students, allowing those students to better access industry validated credentials at each stage of their educational and career journey.

The partnership between the local workforce board, job center, and college served as the foundation for determining which contracted and continuing education classes would best fit the pathway strategy. Once the courses were identified, Nicolet's workforce development team met with the credit program faculty frequently to determine the most effective mean of breaking-apart the current credit curriculum into smaller offerings that could be offered as contracted training opportunities or continuing education courses.

Once curriculum was identified and broken-down, the logistics involved in building the bridge between the non-credit offering and credit program had to be created. Non-credit offerings that were done as contract courses with employers or stand alone as continuing education professional development courses would have to cost as much as (or some instances more than) the equivalent of the credit course. Not only does that pricing structure help gain funds for the college but it also discourages people from taking non-credit offerings to save money over enrolling in the credit program courses. The courses will be flagged as having the option for students to obtain advanced standing if they take the assessment at the end of the course. If a student opts out of the assessment they still receive their continuing education credits, and if they decide at a later date to request the assessment they can do so through Nicolet College's Credit for Prior Learning process. This offers the student two different ways to obtain credit for the contract course or continuing education course. Using the assessment method also proves that educational attainment and real learning has occurred, unlike the non-pathway continuing education courses grading method of successful or unsuccessful based on attendance only for continuing education courses. This new method also validates the material being taught and the student's ability to demonstrate mastery of the skill being assessed.

Nicolet utilizes career coaches that meet with all the students in the identified pathway courses to discuss the option of advanced standing, offer credit for prior learning, and aid any students interested in pursuing a degree into credit programs. Creating student access to the career coaches allows the student to identify and plan for any barriers the student may face prior to enrolling into a credit program. The relationship the students have with the college, the faculty, and the staff make the transition from the workplace to the classroom easy and painless for the students. This approach creates a seamless pathway into credit programing for those who may have been out of the world of education for many years who are hesitant to return to college. It lets the student truly experience the rigors of college program work within one or more classes, eventually creating the confidence to enter a credit program.

One additional benefit of using the non-credit to credit pathway is the flexibility in scheduling that it offers to non-traditional students. Contract training is often done on-site at an employer's location or during work hours. Continuing education can be scheduled nights, weekends, hybrid, online, or as an open lab. This allows for students to get the training they need in small chunks at a time and place that works best for them. Having this flexible option helps students to see that it is possible to get college credit around their busy schedules. Having our career coaches available to these students also allows our staff to explain how our credit programs have many flexible options they may not be aware of in a face to face environment.

Nicolet uses comprehensive wrap around student services for all students, whether they are involved in contracted training, continuing education, or credit course. Students have access to all the services the college has to offer, and having career coaches meet with students involved in any non-credit to credit pathway to help them navigate their individual needs and goals sets our students up for success. While creating the non-credit to credit pathways, Nicolet relied heavily on their partnerships between the workforce development team, credit program faculty, the workforce development board, the job center, and the student services staff. Without having every team represented, pieces would have been missed. Collaboration was key to making each of the pathways a seamless transition between the world of work and the world of education.

Northwest Wisconsin is not unlike other regions in Wisconsin or throughout the country facing a labor shortage. Unemployment in Wisconsin continues to decline and individuals entering retirement age continue to rise. Many employers are struggling to find workers and those they do find sometimes don't stick around for long or have many other hurdles within their life. Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College (WITC) offers career-focused associate degree programs, technical diplomas, short-term certificates, customized training, and a wide array of courses for personal or career enhancement. WITC has four campuses in Ashland, New Richmond, Superior, and Rice Lake, two outreach centers at Hayward and Ladysmith, and our Washburn County Learning Center located in Spooner. In total, it covers 11 counties and over 10,000 square miles. The college is also part of the Wisconsin Technical College System. Within this region are two Workforce Development Boards (Northwest Wisconsin Workforce Investment Board and West Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board). WITC and the workforce development agencies have worked together for years through referring students, on career events, and more, but hadn't created a formal collaboration tied to career pathway programs, which under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), was a new approach. The emphasis on career pathways forced all of us, in a really positive way, to examine how we could work together to ultimately get people trained and ready for employment and meet the employment needs of employers within the region. There are multiple factors that have proven useful as we work on aligning credit-based career pathways between WIOA and WITC:

- **Gather Partners Together: Learn about Programs & Look for Common Initiatives**

With this intent in mind, WITC developed a Partnership Team in January 2017. When



planning who to gather, representatives from all the agencies tied to WIOA, literacy programs, community action programs (CAP), and other community service agencies were sought out and invited. In the case of this team, representatives from the following agencies attended: Northwest Wisconsin Workforce Investment Board, West Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, Workforce Resource, Northwest Wisconsin Concentrated Employment Program (CEP), Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Area Health Education Center (AHEC), Northwest Wisconsin Community Services Agency (NWCSA), Western Wisconsin Community Action Agency (WestCAP), Indianhead Community Action Agency (ICAA), Crossroads Literacy, and WITC. Since this initial meeting, additional agencies have been involved. While a large part of the time was spent learning about the programs of each agency, it resulted in a fairly easy consensus when looking at the initiatives to focus on. In addition, it showcased the extensive work that each agency has done to look at the economic needs of the region and how combining our knowledge can have a bigger impact. The initiatives that resulted from this initial meeting have since provided guidance for the committee.

- **Jump In and Try Projects Together**

One successful collaboration was with the NWWIB. It was the development of the Construction Essentials Academy. A 10-week training program was developed, incorporating this nine-credit, embedded Technical Diploma. Individuals were recruited through the NWWIB and CEP and WITC coordinated the training. In addition, NWWIB was able to highlight some opportunities for improvement through the training, and as a result, together we were able to redesign the training that will continue to meet the needs of employers and also meet the unique needs of the population. As a result, further construction academies are being planned.

- **Continue to Communicate & Recognize That You All Need Each Other**

One of the initiatives that resulted from the Partnership Committee, was to look at opportunities to collaborate on basic education and literacy as tied to WIOA Title II. Multiple working meetings and much outreach has been done since January 2017 to find out the best way to meet the outcomes of the grant.

There are several other projects being explored by the Partnership Committee and other sub-groups that have resulted, but had we not taken the time to come together, we may not have gotten to this point. All of the partnering agencies bring new insights, knowledge, and research to the table as how to meet the needs of individuals and employers in the region. Thanks to the openness and spirit of collaboration among all, we have been able to make real strides at credit-based career pathways and look forward to working together on more.

As the Wisconsin Technical College System and its WIOA title partners continue their journey, the future of Wisconsin Pathways is bright. The collaborative approach to exploring what is possible and how best to achieve these goals is fueled by a common passion to continually improve the quality of life in Wisconsin. Through consistent collaboration across all organizations, Wisconsin will continue to grow its talent development resources to meet the current and future needs while creating opportunity and access for all Wisconsinites. ☸