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THE FUTURE OF WORKFORCE EDUCATION

A ROADMAP FOR TRANSFORMATIVE
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT



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PREPARED BY



KINETIC WEST

BACKGROUND

For more than 30 years, the **National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE)** has advanced workforce education excellence and innovation at the nation's community and technical colleges through practitioner-driven, student-centered solutions. As an independent nonprofit and long-standing affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges, NCWE contributes to national efforts to strengthen community colleges and expand access to college and career opportunities.



NCWE improves credential completion, expands career pathways, and drives economic prosperity by transforming the workforce education landscape—the dynamic continuum of adult education, noncredit and credit micro-credentials, stackable certificates, career and technical education degrees, apprenticeships, and applied Baccalaureate pathways. Responding to the needs of our network, NCWE offers effective professional development, peer learning, technical assistance, research, and communications that scale innovation across the workforce ecosystem. NCWE's national network includes thousands of community and technical colleges, nonprofits, research and advocacy organizations, human service agencies, industry partners, workforce entities, and economic development leaders to ensure both decision-makers and frontline practitioners are translating research into policy and practice change.

SUPPORTING TRANSFORMATIVE WORKFORCE LEADERS

In early 2026, NCWE undertook a comprehensive effort to identify what leadership development programming and initiatives would support and develop transformative workforce education leaders. NCWE commissioned Kinetic West to conduct a landscape analysis to better understand the leadership development needs of those working in workforce education at community colleges across the country. This research also aimed to surface the most pressing issues facing workforce leaders and ideas for future programming, partnerships, and content designed for workforce professionals at every career stage—from emerging leaders to seasoned college executives seeking continuous, contextualized professional development.

NCWE improves credential completion, expands career pathways, and drives economic prosperity by transforming the workforce education landscape.



With the support of Kinetic West, NCWE engaged community college practitioners across the country through a national survey, virtual focus groups, and one-on-one interviews with executive institutional and system leaders. Participants came from community colleges of all sizes, in urban, rural, and suburban communities, representing every region of the country. They represented a broad range of roles — from frontline staff and faculty to deans, directors, vice presidents, and presidents — as well as workforce and community partners outside the institution. A full description of methods is included in the appendix.

This report synthesizes what we heard about the challenges and opportunities facing workforce education today, the leadership development needs of practitioners, and the types of resources and programming that would be most useful.

This work was made possible thanks to the generous support of JPMorganChase. Kinetic West and NCWE are grateful to all the community college leaders and practitioners who shared their time, candor, and insights.



KEY ISSUES AFFECTING WORKFORCE EDUCATION TODAY

Across every data source, participants identified a consistent and overlapping set of challenges and opportunities facing workforce education today. These issues form the backdrop for understanding leadership development needs.

FUNDING COMPLEXITY AND INSTABILITY

The most consistently cited challenge was funding — securing, managing, and sustaining investments. Participants described reliance on patchwork funding streams, including federal grants, state investments, employer contracts, and emerging sources like Workforce Pell — and the significant expertise required to manage, braid, and sustain those streams. Several focus group participants described operating entirely on grant funds, with no general operating dollars to support workforce programs.

Multiple participants described the high effort required to “braid” funding streams from federal programs like Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), state investments, and competitive grants — each with its own eligibility rules, reporting requirements, and timelines. Participants also expressed concern about the start-and-stop nature of grant-funded work, which makes it difficult to sustain relationships with employers, build institutional

“I have seen workforce leaders struggle to help presidents understand the complexity of workforce education and garner strong support — not just in words on a strategic plan or mission statement, but bottom-line budget and resources from the institution.”

— Survey Respondent



knowledge, or develop pipelines of trained instructors. The survey data reinforces this: 55.2% of respondents identified “budgeting and braiding funding” as a top area where they need more support, and 53.4% cited grant management specifically.

Workforce Pell emerged as a specific pressure point. While participants expressed optimism about its potential, several noted that very few programs will qualify under current parameters, implementation timelines are outpacing state-level infrastructure, and the “hurry up and wait” dynamic — e.g., being

asked to have programs ready rapidly as approval systems lag and processes remain in flux — is a significant source of strain.

Several participants also raised the challenge of linking state funding to wage outcome data, particularly for employer-customized training where employers are reluctant to share employees’ personally identifiable information such as social security numbers. This creates a program integrity challenge that institutions are being asked to solve without clear guidance.

“We’re asking institutions to do more and more, but we’re not providing ample funding for that. And as happy as we are about Workforce Pell, very few programs are actually covered. So, [Workforce Pell is] not the relief that they had hoped it would be.”

— Focus Group Participant

“Making sure that we’re able to align our programs with the changing labor market...changing student needs, and our changing employer expectations. The key is: how fast are we able to adapt our programs? How do we sustain the industry partnerships that we have with all of these changes?”

— Focus Group Participant

ACCELERATING PACE OF CHANGE

The labor market is shifting faster than higher education institutions were designed to respond. New industries emerge, skills become obsolete, and student and employer expectations are evolving continuously. For example, several participants highlighted shifting employer demands for shorter, more targeted training (e.g., medical assisting programs being condensed from two years to less than a year or apprenticeship models). The lives and resource needs of modern learners are increasingly complex. This requires more rapid and nuanced responses to their needs, or risk student disengagement entirely.

The policy environment has been equally volatile. Major developments (e.g., Workforce Pell, Registered

Apprenticeship expansion, the CHIPS Act, new state funding models) have arrived in rapid succession, often without clear implementation guidance. The pace itself becomes the problem: change moves fast enough that the details haven’t been worked out by the time institutions are expected to act.

For participants in our focus groups, this pace created a particular kind of pressure: the need to be simultaneously responsive to immediate demands and strategic about longer-term direction. As one participant described it, things like Workforce Pell had been “slowly simmering” for years among experienced leaders — but “over the last year, they’re at boiling point, and you need to implement it now.” New staff, meanwhile, “don’t have the luxury of getting that time to really understand what it means.”





“Support for leaders to consider and respond to the massive amount of political, financial, societal, and environmental change higher ed has experienced over the last year. How might we begin to chart our future, what might we need to build for system resiliency over the next 2 – 10 years.”

— Survey Respondent

These circumstances make it difficult to remain strategic and responsive, not reactive; to improvise under pressure and move forward with purpose amidst ambiguity. As one participant put it, the pattern repeats itself: a funding opportunity appears, institutions scramble to plan and launch an initiative given a hard deadline to spend the funds — and only then does anyone ask fundamental questions about what long term success would look like and the programs that can achieve that. When change moves this fast, the connection between big objectives and implementation can become disjointed or watered down.

ELIMINATING CREDIT AND NONCREDIT DIVIDES

A recurring theme in our focus groups was the challenge of internal culture change — particularly, getting faculty, academic and student service departments, and broader campus leadership to understand and embrace workforce education as a college-wide responsibility rather than a siloed function. They elevated the difficulties of moving away from a traditional, bifurcated model with “academic and workforce sides” of the college, towards a modernized one-college model that meets the needs of the community and today’s learners. Participants raised the challenge of ensuring workforce programs are understood as a through line across the college — spanning adult education, noncredit/professional credit/continuing education, apprenticeship, and applied Baccalaureate pathways — without diluting their ability to be nimble, innovative, and responsive. Workforce pathways need to be valued as much as lower division transfer pathways, but must continue to operate differently to serve students, employers, and the community effectively.

“The biggest problem that I have faced so far in this role is really trying to get the rest of my colleagues on campus to shift into a mindset of everything that we do as workforce...we’re all trying to prepare our students to enter the workforce and develop the skills that they need to be successful. I’ve just met a lot of resistance in trying to change that cultural mindset.”

— Focus Group Participant

Noncredit/professional credit workforce programs tend to operate with less institutional status and less stable funding. Multiple participants described resistance from lower division transfer faculty who perceive workforce programs as competition for students, as well as from institutional cultures that historically centered the transfer pathway.

One participant at a midwestern community college describe the internal college tension: “We have experienced faculty pushback, because it’s like, you want our students, you want to take over — no,



we do not. We want to collaborate.” Participants also highlighted the unacknowledged connection between workforce and academic programs. For example, one person shared that 12% of workforce students at her institution eventually enroll in academic programs, making collaboration mutually beneficial. Many workforce students are also returning students, having completed some college without earning a credential; or having earned prior credentials or degrees, but returning for additional skill development and credentials to change careers or advance in their current industry.

However, describing this reality and shifting past precedents that have bifurcated and siloed students, faculty, and departments can be especially challenging in times of enrollment decline or funding scarcity. This is especially true when the livelihood of faculty and staff can feel threatened. It was noted that colleges need to do a better job supporting and incentivizing faculty to do things differently — to invest in faculty development and recognize the time and effort required to collaborate in new ways with peers and across departments and divisions.

Participants also described campus cultures where workforce is seen as peripheral, both figuratively (“There are people who really are struggling to even care about it”) and literally (“in the building across campus from everybody else”). Participants want to close the gap and ensure workforce development is recognized as a core part of community colleges’ missions and that can function in close collaboration with academic programs.

“

How do you get both the workforce and the lower division transfer on the same alignment and value across the institution? I think [this] is critical, and takes a skill to be able to do it — otherwise you’re just focused on one and not the other. And both are equally valuable, and they should be able to learn from each other.”

– Interviewee

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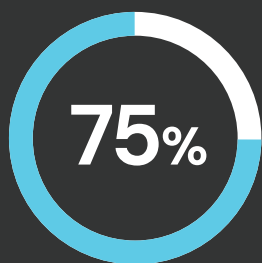
By elevating workforce education, it does not devalue the traditional experience. People need to be educated on the importance of that.”

– Interviewee

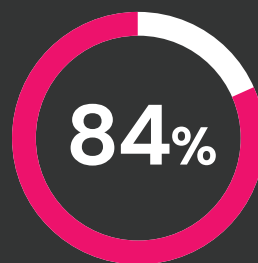


LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Workforce education leaders arrive in their roles from many different pathways — from industry, from student services, from academic affairs, and sometimes from unrelated fields. There is no established pipeline into workforce leadership. As one focus group participant candidly recalled: “When I came into my role as director of workforce development, it just sort of happened. I’d worked in K-12, worked in higher ed. I didn’t know anything about workforce development.... I felt like I completed a degree in workforce development in a year’s time, just trying to learn it all.”



75% of workforce education leaders feel moderately (50%) or fully (25%) prepared personally



84% of workforce education leaders say the need for leadership development in workforce education is very urgent (17%), urgent (22%) or somewhat urgent (45%)

This experience is common. The survey confirmed it: most respondents said they felt personally prepared to lead but largely attributed that preparation to years of on-the-job experience, not formal training. At the same time, 84% of survey respondents identified leadership development in workforce education as an urgent need at community colleges. In other words, the field has produced capable leaders — but largely through experience and personal perseverance, not design.

Compounding this, the role of workforce development leaders has expanded well beyond what traditional academic leadership programs were designed to address. It now encompasses employer and community partnerships, grant management, revenue development, labor market analysis, future-focused strategic planning, entrepreneurial mindsets, policy and advocacy, change management, holistic student services, and cross-sector collaboration — a scope that one participant described as requiring “a hybrid model” of skills that “historically may not have been” expected of college leaders.

“I answered that I’m fully prepared to support work—force education because of my many years of experience in the field. However, the college has not provided this education or training.”

– Survey Respondent

“There’s a whole bunch of different skills that are now required that historically may not have been there, and I think part of that is because it’s become more and more complex.”

– Focus Group Participant





“There is continued need for leadership development to lead in the changing landscape — moving from traditional higher education models to workforce education models. Helping facilitate a sense of urgency for change and leading the change process — both [are] essential.”

— Survey Respondent

HIGHLY CITED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

The survey asked respondents to identify the areas where they most need support or additional leadership development. Six broad domains emerged, and within each, respondents identified more specific sub-areas. Across these categories, some of the most consistent and urgent signals from the field are outlined below.

Leading Change and Innovation

Change management was the top-cited sub-area within the “transformative and innovative leadership” area, cited by 65.5% of respondents who selected that domain. Creating a shared vision and culture (60.3%) and coaching and mentoring (48.3%) were also highly cited.

Focus group conversations gave texture to these numbers. Participants described change as multidirectional — they need to lead change within their institutions (winning over skeptical faculty and administrators, eliminating silos), and also navigate externally imposed change from policy, funding, and the labor market. Participants talked about the importance of change, and also the challenges of navigating many changes simultaneously.

“

Our employers are demanding change in delivery... they're demanding it, and if we don't change with that, they find somebody who will.”

— Focus Group Participant

“

Some research about change management attached to emotional intelligence support can really help leaders acknowledge when people are struggling, or they need more time or more support. I think change management strategies are the theory. I think emotional intelligence is the application, and you put those two together, it can be a really... a really good thing. So, I think that we don't always invest enough in this.”

— Interviewee

“

There's a lot of pressure on the staff to learn these concepts and learn them quickly, or you fall behind. And as we see colleges closing everywhere, and departments closing everywhere, there's that pressure to stay ahead of the game.”

— Focus Group Participant

Developing Programs and Pathways for Modern Learners

Among respondents who selected “program” as an area of need, 76.4% — the highest sub-area in the entire survey — cited “creating pathways and meeting the needs of modern learners” as their top priority. This includes noncredit/credit alignment, credit for prior learning (CPL), competency-based education, work-based learning, and apprenticeship.

The survey results highlighted this area as one of the top two most-cited development needs overall, alongside change management. Focus group participants spoke to the complexity involved: navigating competing accreditation timelines, engaging faculty in designing employer-responsive programs, and helping students see stackable credentials as a coherent pathway rather than a series of disconnected certificates.

One leader described how their institution addressed this by ensuring their institutional strategy and planning centers and accelerates innovation. Their future-focused lens has required that all institutional leaders have an entrepreneurial mindset and understand trends, labor market data, and employer and community needs to build pathways that create economic opportunity. They were able to stand up AI awareness and education programming well ahead of other higher ed providers because of continuing professional education’s ability to develop relevant and high-quality curriculum and programs alongside business and industry, at a pace much faster than traditional curriculum approval cycles. At the same time, they ensure the programs align with and map into credit-bearing curriculum development and transfer pathways.

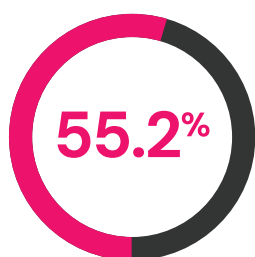
Resource Management and Funding Strategies

In the “administration” domain, budgeting and braiding funding was cited by 55.2% of respondents, and grant management by 53.4%. Fundraising and revenue development was identified by 48.3%. These numbers reflect the reality described in the challenges section: workforce education largely runs on unstable, competitive funding, and leaders need to be fluent in managing that complexity.

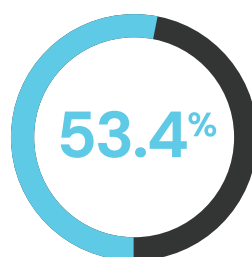
“It is crucial that we meet individuals wherever they are in life. Help them map that journey, because their journey may lead them to a 2-year or 4-year degree. But that is not what they’re ready for right now. And it’s okay if their journey to that 2-year, 4-year degree is 10 years. It’s the milestones along the way — how can I help them really see the value in micro-credentialing, stacking those micro-credentials.”

— Interviewee

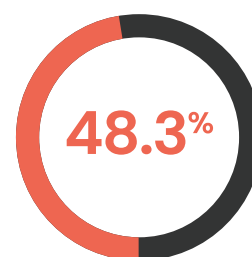
Administrative leadership development needs identified by respondents.



Fundraising & Revenue Development



Grant Management



Budgeting & Braiding Funding



Focus group participants added nuance: the challenge is not just securing funds, but forecasting, managing compliance and data, and helping teams understand “where do I pay attention?” as the landscape of federal and state funding programs multiplies. Workforce leaders must be able to develop relationships with funders and foundations, while simultaneously creating structures and systems to grow and manage resources. One participant offered a concrete example: using AI to automate grant reporting saved her team hours — but the forecasting work that enables grant management still required deep human review. For small and rural institutions, this often entails partnerships and effective consortia efforts to reduce administrative burden and achieve the scale many funders and grants require, which adds another layer of complexity and skill sets.

“A lot of the innovation is driven by federal grants and state grants... it creates a lot of complexity for workforce managers — where do I pay attention, and how do I help my institution more effectively braid those resources?”

— Focus Group Participant



External Partnership Development

In the “employer and industry partnerships” domain, “moving beyond transactional to collective impact” was cited by 70.7% of respondents — the highest sub-area within that category. “Models for effective partnership” was cited by 61.0%.

Participants described the difference between transactional employer engagement (a company donates equipment, a job fair happens) and the kind of sustained, strategic sector partnership that produces real workforce system change. One participant from the northeast described doing “sector partnership work” where employers direct the college’s training agenda: “You tell us what you want, and we’re going to deliver it.” Another participant warned: “If programs don’t change, the employer will take it someplace else... once they do it, it’s hard to bring them back.” This is the type of collaboration and partnership that leaders are looking for support in developing.

Of survey respondents who flagged community collaboration as a development need, the most cited challenge was navigating the broader workforce ecosystem — Local Workforce Development Boards,

“Are you sitting on boards of economic development agencies in your region? ...You’ve got to have the partnerships in your region, the statewide pieces, workforce boards that you connect with, associations, whether that may be specific unions.”

— Focus Group Participant



Chambers of Commerce, economic development agencies, K-12, human service agencies, and community-based organizations — identified by 68.3% of respondents in that domain.

Policy, Advocacy, and Storytelling

In the “policy” domain, 80% of respondents who selected that category cited “understanding and influencing policy: internal, local, state, and federal” as their top need. Advocacy and storytelling was cited by 48.9%.

This area came up vividly in focus groups. Participants described a field that has tremendous impact but struggles to communicate about it effectively. One participant noted that “oftentimes we’re too modest for our own good,” and that if another college does something successful, “they’re going to put that article in front of us.” Storytelling was consistently named as an underdeveloped skill — and a critical one for making the case to campus leadership, legislators, and funders.

“I think it is crucial that [we] understand the importance of how to tell the story of [our] work. And I don’t think [we] always know how to do that.”

— Interviewee

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON EFFECTIVE RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS

Across every data source, participants were clear about what they want from professional development and equally clear about what has not worked in the past. The themes below recurred consistently across the survey, both focus groups, and one-on-one interviews.

PRACTICAL, APPLICABLE, AND GROUNDED IN REAL CONDITIONS

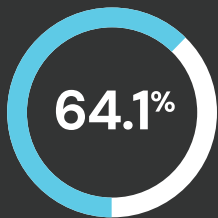
The single most consistent signal from the field is a demand for practicality. Survey respondents cited the chance to learn directly from peers and “ready-to-use tools, examples, case studies, templates” as what would be most helpful. Focus group participants echoed this explicitly and added a specific kind of credibility requirement: they want examples from practitioners who did not start with abundant resources, which is more reflective of reality.

Survey respondents asked for templates for program review, grant management tools, playbooks of “what’s worked for others,” real-world examples of career pathway pipelines, and “a rubric or catalog of ‘goosey’ leadership skills, policy work topics, and best practices for organizational transformation.” The appetite for practical tools is high — and the frustration with frameworks-without-application is equally high.

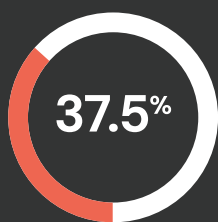
“When I go to a conference and the first line is, ‘We started with a \$3 million grant from our local foundation’ — well, okay, that’s great for you, but that will probably not happen for me. How can we start from a place where we don’t have the upfront capital?”

— Focus Group Participant





Preferred academy or cohort-based models which create space for sustained peer learning



Preferred case studies with group discussion

"The framework applied with real people doing it, and the transparency of 'we tried this, and boy, it didn't work' is just as helpful as things that did work."

– Focus Group Participant

PEER-DRIVEN, PRACTITIONER-LED CONTENT

Participants throughout expressed skepticism toward resources and programs that are produced by outsiders telling practitioners how to do their jobs. They want to hear from peers — people who are doing the work, have faced similar constraints, and can speak to what happens, not just what should happen in theory.

What practitioners mean by "practitioner-led" is specific: they want to hear the nuance, including what did not work. As one participant put it: "Tell me the fluff, but show me the stuff that didn't work, too, because I don't want to do that." The transparency about failure is as valued as the success story. Case studies that "get in the weeds" about how something was done, "not just the framework applied, but the framework applied with real people doing it," were consistently named as the most useful form of content.

The survey reinforced this preference: case studies with group discussion was cited by 37.5% of respondents as a preferred training modality, and academy or cohort-based models, which create space for sustained peer learning, was the most preferred format overall, cited by 64.1%.

MENTORSHIP, COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE, AND LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

Several participants described moments of profound professional isolation — e.g., entering a role they were not trained for, not knowing what they did not know, and lacking anyone outside their own institution to turn to. The call for mentorship was not abstract; it was personal.

Participants also praised existing communities of practice for the depth they allow. Respondents appreciate the ability to spend more time with a single case, dig in, and ask follow-up questions that a

webinar format cannot accommodate. One participant observed that in a webinar, "each person has enough time to just share a little bit," but in a community of practice, "you're able to spend more time highlighting... get in the weeds and specifically find out about what they did."

There was also strong interest in professional relationships that persist beyond a single event or cohort. Participants appreciated the opportunity to cultivate a long-term network of peers who they can call on for thought partnership and support. One participant described a multi-institution cohort experience where the community of practice is designed to develop relationships amongst colleagues, a network of "people you always can call and connect with" and noted that this sustained connection made the professional development more durable.





"I wish there was a mentoring — I don't even know if we want to call it a group — where I was paired with another workforce development professional who was in the field for quite some time, just to get a perspective. I didn't have that."

— Focus Group Participant

"I've learned a lot from different communities of practice I've been in."

— Focus Group Participant

At the same time, participants acknowledged that time is a significant constraint. Leaders described calendars packed from morning to evening and described difficulty even attending webinars. Any community of practice model needs to account for the reality that participants are operating under significant time pressure and initiative fatigue.

EASY TO NAVIGATE, JUST-IN-TIME RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

Alongside the call for cohort relationships and deep mentorship, participants also expressed a need for resources that are easy to find and fast to use. The workforce field is awash in reports, frameworks, and publications — but for a practitioner who just stepped into a new role or is facing an immediate challenge, the sheer volume is overwhelming rather than helpful.

Survey respondents asked for resources that are "flexible and portable" and "no more than a full day." One respondent explicitly said: "I do not have time and my day flexes too much to do an academy. I really like one focused topic at a time." Several focus group participants also raised the need for trusted, best practice examples — short, real, practitioner-driven, accessible and on demand learning resources that are "plug and play," adaptable to a range of institutions and regions and able to be used as needed.

"There is too much information for workforce professionals, especially those who are new, to filter through. So if you were adding more resources, that's great. But part of the challenge for people is they don't know which resource to use."

— Focus Group Participant



CONNECTION BETWEEN LOCAL PRACTICE AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

One of the most consistent tensions that emerged across focus groups is the relationship between what works locally and how to drive broader, systems-level change. Participants are deeply rooted in their local contexts; they know their students, their employers, their communities, their institutional cultures, and their regional labor markets. But the funding and policy systems that shape their work are national and state-level, and those systems can feel disconnected from local realities.



“The connection between local practice and systems change — I think to be successful, we’re going to all have to collaborate more. Even a tiny little college applying for a grant on our own isn’t going to fly for most of the grants out there now. But if we collaborate with the other [community colleges in my state] and then look beyond our state borders — that’s where our future is.”

— Focus Group Participant

Several participants pointed to partnership as a model that bridges local and systemic change. For example, sector partnerships bringing employers, workforce boards, community colleges, and economic development agencies into a shared regional strategy. One participant described how state investment in industry-sector partnerships had taken years to build but was “a game changer... when it starts to work well.” Another described how sector partnership work had reoriented the college’s role: not programming for employers, but co-designing with them.

A challenge that was surfaced by many is that funding opportunities or models that are lauded nationally often fail to recognize what is needed in small, rural, or remote communities. The bias towards scale frequently misses the transformative impact and unique challenges that face small and rural institution with a proven ability to drive local economic development and create opportunities for their students and employers.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NCWE SOLUTIONS

Workforce education is more visible, more urgent, and more complex than it has ever been. The practitioners in NCWE's network are navigating this complexity with remarkable skill, but often without the supports they need and want. This report is an invitation to build those supports together, centering the expertise of the field and the real conditions in which the work happens. It reflects NCWE's deep commitment to advance workforce education excellence through student-centered, practitioner-driven solutions and partnerships.

Based on a synthesis of the survey data, focus group conversations, and one-on-one interviews, several recommendations and solutions emerged that are grounded in what we heard from the field.

1

DEVELOP AND OFFER DYNAMIC AND ACCESSIBLE WORKFORCE LEADERSHIP MODELS

Survey respondents and focus group participants consistently asked for a combination of programming that could meet the needs of emerging and executive leaders, recognizing the field has changed significantly and the workforce leader's profile is more varied than ever, including people coming from academic affairs, student services, industry, and state administration.

The survey confirms continued appetite for cohort-based learning: 64.1% of respondents named academy or cohort models as their preferred modality. Several survey respondents specifically asked for "a follow-on from the former NCWE New Workforce Professionals Academy," and many noted NCWE's unique depth of workforce-specific expertise among its practitioner network. A reinvented academy should prioritize practitioner-led sessions, peer learning, and mentoring, and also be designed to complement rather than duplicate existing leadership initiatives.

"We need more national training programs for workforce development employees... effective hands-on practical training for workforce development practitioners is lacking. There are very few courses and almost no degrees for this industry, and we have everyday people entering the space ill-prepared."

— Survey Respondent



2

SHARE RESOURCES AND PRACTITIONER KNOWLEDGE

Across all sources, the demand for practical, accessible, just-in-time resources is clear. A clear recommendation emerged for NCWE to use its national network and reach to curate, create, and amplify practitioner knowledge that maps to priority topics (securing and braiding funding, employer partnerships, etc.) and by practitioner need (e.g., navigating Workforce Pell implementation).

Content should include brief case studies, templates, toolkits, and other short-form modalities that reflect the real conditions of the field. Resources should center practitioner and student voice, and explicitly include examples of what did not work, not just success stories.

The call for mentorship was one of the most emotionally resonant themes across all data sources.



3

EXPAND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND MENTORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

The call for mentorship was one of the most emotionally resonant themes across all data sources. Practitioners want the chance to learn from experienced peers across institutional lines, to understand both successes and failures of individual leaders and understand issues through the lens of various institutional, geographic, and political contexts.

The value of effective communities of practice, with practical and actionable peer learning, was also resonant among all groups. There was a clear call for NCWE to use its position as a national convener of practitioners to develop and offer communities of practice organized around specific topic areas; designed for depth, not breadth.

4

NCWE AS AN AMPLIFIER OF PRACTITIONER VOICE

Across focus groups and interviews, a distinctive role emerged for NCWE: not as a top-down producer of frameworks, but as an amplifier of the expertise that already exists within its network. This means investing in storytelling infrastructure — helping colleges tell their own stories well, documenting their own innovations, and sharing what they have learned with peers.

It also means playing a meaningful role in policy advocacy. The field is navigating a period of significant policy flux — Workforce Pell, apprenticeship expansion, state funding reform — and practitioners are hungry for help understanding how to influence the systems that constrain their work. NCWE's practitioner network gives the organization a credible, collective voice. The survey indicates 80% of respondents who selected policy as a development need cited understanding and influencing policy as their top priority. NCWE can play a key role to support practitioners' policy literacy and amplify their voices in the conversations where decisions are made.

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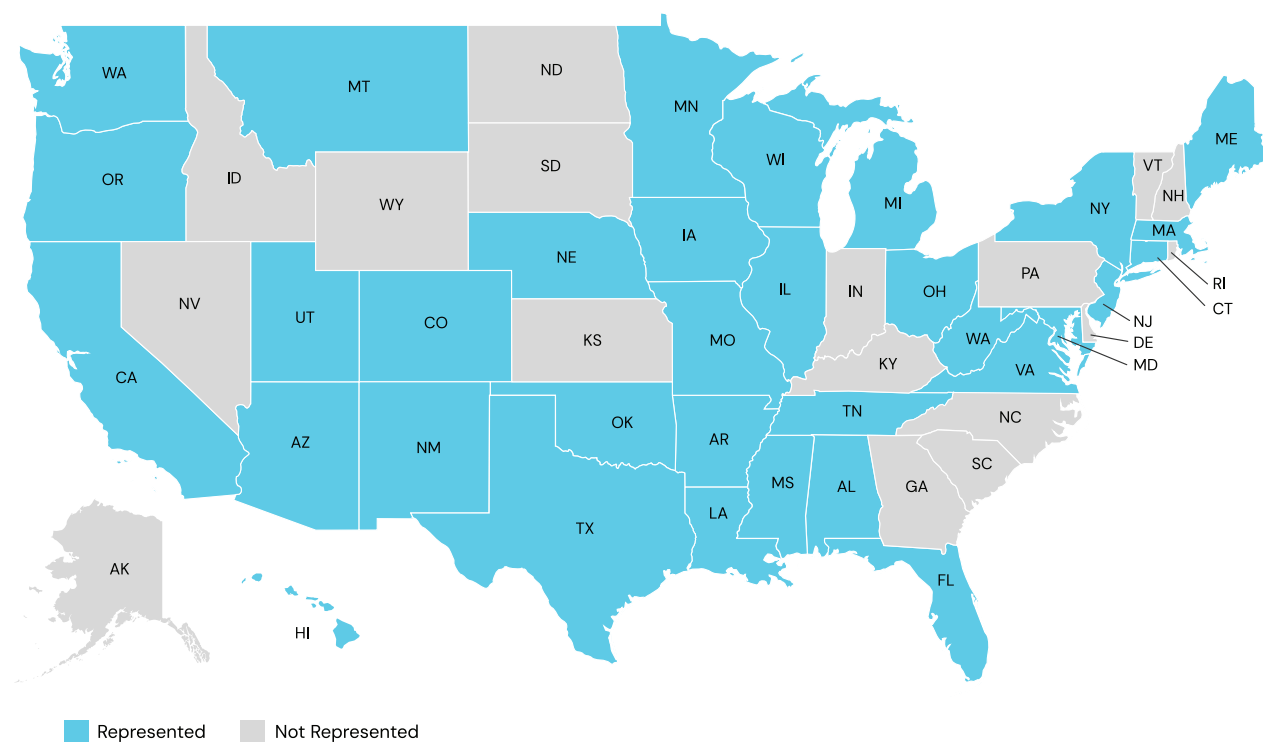


APPENDIX

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This report draws on three complementary sources of data collected in early 2026: a national survey, three virtual focus groups, and one-on-one interviews with senior leaders. Together, these sources paint a rich, multi-layered picture of the field. Where survey data provides breadth, the focus groups and interviews provide depth, grounding the numbers in the lived experience of practitioners.

This analysis includes perspectives from across the country — respondents were representative of every region of the country, including the Southeast, Midwest, Northeast, Mountain West, and Pacific Coast, with Hawaii included.



SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Respondents represented a range of roles across different institutional levels:

Role	Percent
President / CEO	5.3%
Executive Leadership Team (VP, AVP, Chancellor, Cabinet)	18.3%
Administrative (Dean, Director, Manager)	54.2%
Staff	13.0%
Faculty	3.8%
Workforce / Community Partner	3.8%

Respondents came from institutions of all sizes:

Total student headcount (credit and non-credit combined)	Percent
Under 1,000	2.5%
1,000 to 2,499	11.5%
2,500 to 4,999	15.6%
5,000 to 9,999	20.5%
10,000 to 19,999	27.0%
20,000 to 29,999	12.3%
30,000 to 39,999	3.3%
40,000+	7.4%

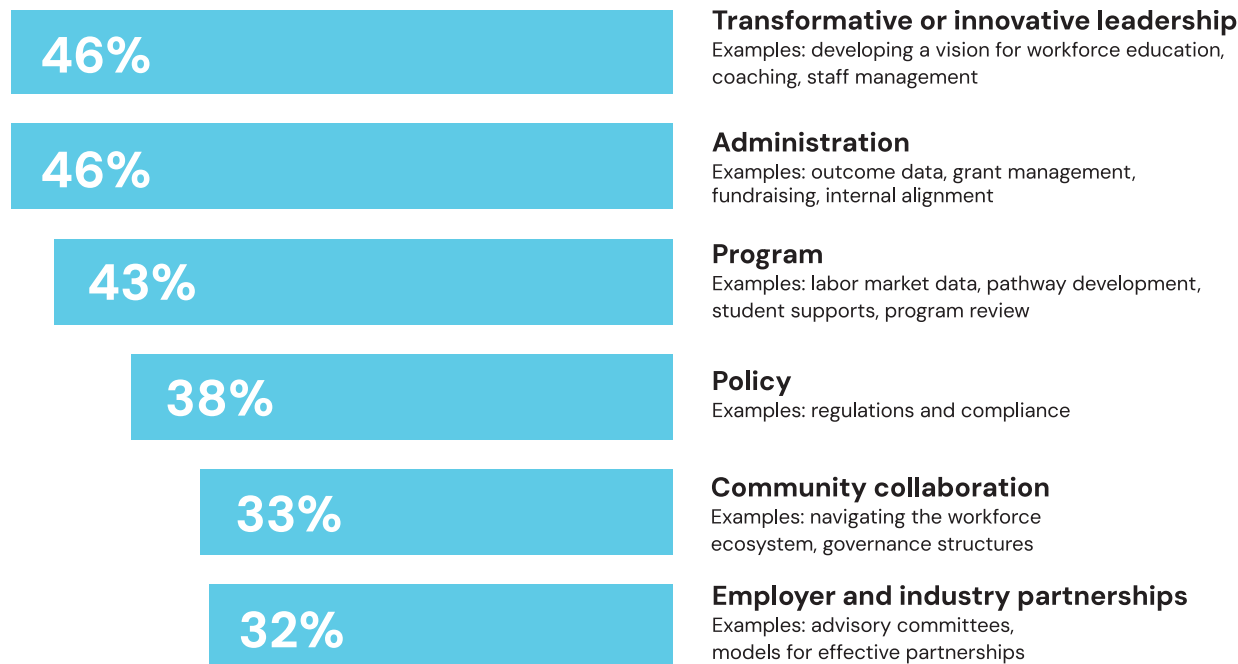
Respondents spanned urban, rural, and suburban communities:

Geography	Percent
Urban	46.9%
Rural	43.8%
Suburban	30.5%
Other	7.8%

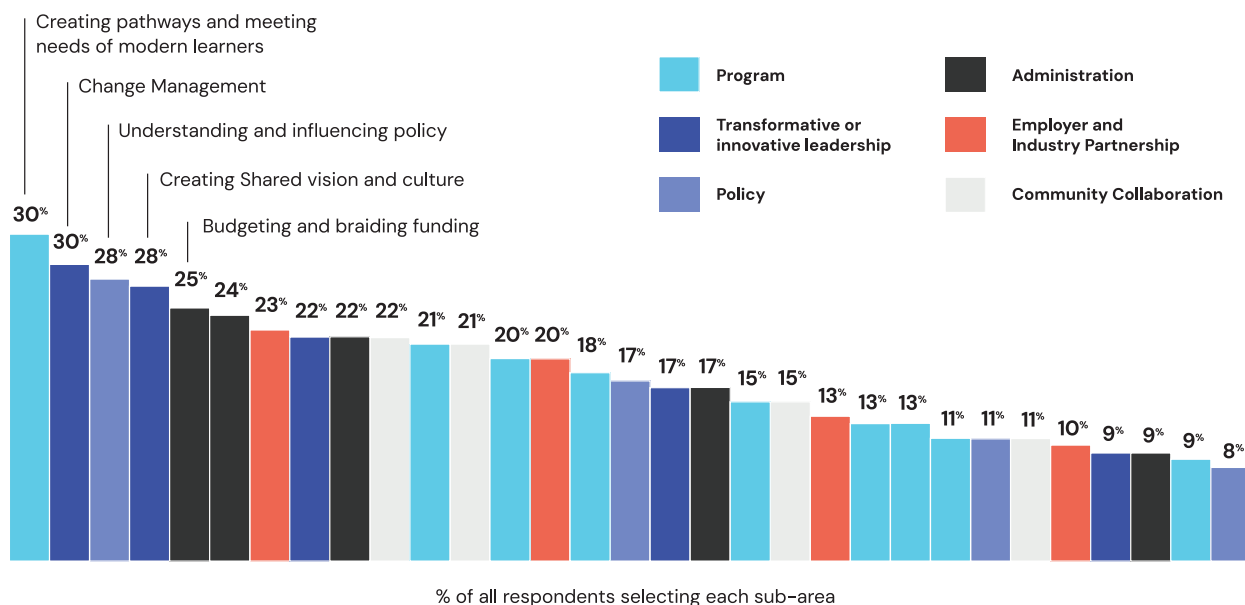


SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

Which of these areas do you most need support or additional leadership development in?



Top sub-areas where workforce leaders need support or additional leadership development:



Top sub-areas where workforce leaders need support or additional leadership development (continued)

Category	Subcategory	% of all respondents
Program	Creating pathways and meeting needs modern learners: Noncredit and Credit alignment, CPL, Competency- Base Education, WBL, apprenticeship	33%
Transformative or innovative leadership	Change management	30%
Policy	Understanding and influencing policy: Internal, local, state and federal	28%
Transformative or innovative leadership	Creating shared vision and culture	28%
Administration	Budgeting and braiding funding	25%
Administration	Grant management	24%
Employer and Industry Partnership	Moving beyond transactional to collective impact	23%
Transformative or innovative leadership	Coaching and mentoring	22%
Administration	Fundraising and revenue development	22%
Community Collaboration	Workforce ecosystem: Collaborating with LWDB's, Chambers, Economic Development, human services, CBOs, K-12, and others	22%
Program	Artificial Intelligence (AI)	21%
Community Collaboration	Marketing workforce programs to various stakeholder audiences	21%
Program	Program marketing and outreach	20%
Employer and Industry Partnership	Models for effective partnership	20%
Program	Program review and assessment	18%
Policy	Making the case: Advocacy and storytelling	17%
Transformative or innovative leadership	Communications and storytelling	17%
Administration	Internal structures	17%
Program	Labor market data	15%
Community Collaboration	Higher ed and workforce governance structures	15%
Employer and Industry Partnership	Advisory committees	13%



Category	Subcategory	% of all respondents
Program	Credentials	13%
Program	Holistic student supports—outreach to career—to support all learners	13%
Program	Integrating technology / automation	11%
Policy	Regulations and compliance (FERPA, etc.)	11%
Community Collaboration	Policy input	11%
Employer and Industry Partnership	Understanding and responding to labor market needs	10%
Transformative or innovative leadership	Shared governance: staff and students	9%
Administration	Accreditation	9%
Program	Dual credit	9%
Policy	Accreditation	8%

METHODOLOGY

Survey

NCWE administered a survey across its network. Between February 5, 2026, and February 24, 2026, the survey received 132 complete responses. Respondents came from community colleges and related organizations across the country, representing a wide range of roles and geographies.

Focus Groups

Three virtual focus groups were facilitated by Kinetic West in March 2026. Two focus groups included workforce education practitioners such as deans, directors, vice presidents, and state-level practitioners. The third and final focus group included college presidents and chief executive officers. Participants came from institutions across the country and represented a broad range of educational contexts and labor market circumstances.

The focus groups were semi-structured, guided by open-ended questions about key challenges, leadership development needs, and preferred forms of support.

One-On-One Interviews

NCWE Executive Director Kate Kinder conducted a number of one-on-one interviews with senior leaders. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and shared with Kinetic West for analysis. They offered a presidential perspective on institutional strategy, the credit/non-credit divide, and what leadership development in the field is missing.

In total, more than 150 workforce education practitioners and leaders engaged in this research.





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