



Meeting the Moment: Workforce Pell

By Kate Kinder | October 22, 2025

The passage of Workforce Pell is the culmination of decades of work championing what our students, businesses, and communities need. It signals a shift towards a higher education system that serves today's students, recognizes all learning and skills, and focuses on outcomes that improve individual lives and our collective prosperity. Workforce Pell validates the importance of high-quality workforce education programs and credentials that lead to good jobs and meet local talent needs—the longstanding work of NCWE colleges and partners.

At the recent NCWE Annual Conference, college and workforce leaders celebrated Workforce Pell and raised questions and considerations that will be key for successful implementation. Thanks to the generous support of the Lumina Foundation, NCWE convened executive-level college and state system leaders representing 22 states and leaders from Lumina, National Governors Association (NGA), Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), CAEL, Strada Education Foundation, Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center, Education Design Lab, Trellis Strategies, C-BEN, PHI, ResearchEd, and more to delve into Workforce Pell and how colleges are meeting the moment.

Recognizing this momentous opportunity, leaders identified key takeaways and recommendations to ensure Workforce Pell results in the intended benefits for students, workers, employers, and local economies:

Process Design, Oversight, and Implementation:

- Collaboration is key to success. While higher education and community college stakeholders are not explicitly called out as required partners in the bill, these key college leaders must be at the table alongside governors' offices and workforce development boards to inform Workforce Pell oversight, approval, and process development.
- Identifying leads and systems for sharing information amongst stakeholder groups will be critical in hastening preparation and effective implementation.
- While there is wide variance in higher education, community college, and workforce governance structure state to state, there is a need to work together nationally to share success and solutions. Listening to states and colleges involved in clock-hour Pell pilots and robust noncredit financial assistance and data infrastructures will be especially important.

Program Qualification:

- There are a lot of questions about which programs can and will qualify on the noncredit and credit side, and concerns that lack of flexibility could restrict workforce programs' effectiveness and ability to respond to student and employer needs.
- Depending upon definitions and outcomes from the negotiated rulemaking, there is a wide range in the number of programs that would qualify and students who would benefit. Very few to many noncredit and credit programs may qualify accordingly.
- To effectively operationalize Workforce Pell, it's imperative to clarify definitions for stackability/portability, one-year in existence, high-skill/wage/demand, credential and outcome requirements; and who and how they are determined at the state and local level.

Alignment of Federal, State, and Local Policies and Funding:

- At the local level, colleges are questioning how to best navigate the lack of or conflicting federal, state, and local guidance and policies. Given the rapid timeline, many state processes will need to be developed prior to or in tandem with federal guidelines, amplifying the confusion.
- It's key that Workforce Pell boosts the aid available to workforce students, and that the federal resources are not seen as a replacement for state and local funding. Leaders are concerned about unintended consequences and the potential for a net reduction in resources available for workforce students and programs.
 - In states with robust investments in nondegree credential programs and financial assistance for workforce students, there is concern that state policymakers could reduce necessary state and local investments before understanding which students could qualify and have their costs covered by Workforce Pell.
 - The proposed funding cap for students, and the restrictions around accessing other Pell grants, could result in students having less resources and access to the aid that they need to complete and stack the high-quality college credentials that advance their careers and economic stability.

Quality and Data:

- While there is wholesale support for better data infrastructures and systems to assess and monitor program and student outcomes, many questions surround the federal and state data reporting requirements. Understanding what data is required, and who is responsible for tracking and reporting the data, is fundamental for accuracy.
- Beyond the unknowns about who is responsible and what data will be required, many leaders want to understand how institutions can access and track the required data. For many institutions, noncredit student data and employment/wage outcomes post-graduation is not available within existing student records or state data systems.

- The focus on quality, to ensure programs can improve people's lives and incomes, is applauded by all stakeholders. Colleges are interested in identifying how these requirements will intersect with accreditation, at the institutional and program level. It is also noted that workforce programs are being held to a higher and more rigid standard than other postsecondary credentials and pathways, despite their shorter time frames and lower funding allocations.

Institutional Change and Impact:

- Workforce Pell can spur much needed systems change, driving institutions to rethink and strengthen the alignment and integration of noncredit and credit. Seamless pathways, credit for prior learning, financial aid, student enrollment management, student record and data systems, and student services (recruitment, advising, retention, and beyond) can all be improved to meet the needs of today's adult learners and support effective Workforce Pell implementation and reporting.
- Leaders are grappling with the challenge of ensuring fidelity in policy implementation, interest in maximizing benefits to their students, and resource and capacity constraints. Financial aid offices, institutional effectiveness, student record and data systems will all be impacted. For smaller and rural colleges, or institutions with restricted staffing and budgets, this is especially front and center.

Next Steps and NCWE's Efforts to Support Workforce Pell

The passage of Workforce Pell is a historic occasion, and college and workforce leaders are collectively energized to meet the moment. It is clear that stakeholders are committed to working together to answer the questions and resolve any challenges surrounding Workforce Pell implementation.

NCWE is excited to collaborate with national partners and support our college members and workforce partners to ensure successful Workforce Pell process design, implementation, and continuous

improvement. Our Board of Directors, member colleges, and leadership team have longstanding success and decades of expertise braiding together federal, state, and local resources to support workforce programs and students. NCWE represents the visionary decision makers and innovative doers who effectively put policies, strategies, programs, systems, and new ideas into practice. Many leaders and member colleges have been part of previous clock-hour Pell pilot programs, and have the strategic and tactical insights on the student enrollment management, financial aid, and data systems that need to be in place to protect the college and ensure student-centered systems and services.

Beyond elevating the expertise of our members and aligning with other national partners like AACC, ACCT, and NGA, NCWE has two projects to support our network and their efforts to operationalize Workforce Pell.

- **Noncredit Student Voices:** In partnership with the Education and Employment Research Center at Rutgers University, the Student Voices Informing Practice in Noncredit Workforce Education initiative will engage 15 colleges and their students to help us understand noncredit student goals and the policies and services that can improve outcomes. This research and community of practice will surface key considerations to ensure Workforce Pell processes remain student-centered. See [Student Voices](#) for more information.
- **Workforce Leadership Development:** NCWE will be launching an initiative to understand the community college workforce leadership development needs, including what issues, policies, and shifts in the higher education and workforce landscape are most pressing for higher education leaders.

Please be on the lookout for continued opportunities to stay engaged and informed, and reach out to let us know how we can support our members and network as we continue to serve our students, communities, and transform lives.

www.ncwe.org | Kate Kinder, kkinder@ncwe.org

