

Learning Agenda

Regional K16 Education Collaborative Grant Program

INTRODUCTION

California is known for its regional and demographic diversity, strong economy, and vibrant quality of life for residents. A skilled workforce is key to continuing California's hallmark economy, however the current rate of educational attainment in California is not sufficient in meeting the growing workforce needs¹. It is essential to develop equitable opportunities for all Californians to secure high-quality jobs that drive a thriving economy. With most of the fast-growing industries requiring post-secondary education¹, we need to establish streamlined education and training pathways to prepare our residents for these high-demand jobs.

The new California Regional K16 Education Collaborative Grant Program is a competitive grant program that supports regional collaborative efforts to create streamlined pathways from high school to postsecondary education and into the workforce. This program is made possible by a \$250 million appropriation to the Department of General Services (DGS) in the Budget Act of 2021.

Regional collaboratives are required to have a robust governance structure led by a steering committee representative of the region's education and workforce partners that include at least one K12 school district, one California Community College (CCC) district, one California State University Campus (CSU), and one University of California Campus (UC). Each regional collaborative must commit to participate in California's Cradle to Career (C2C) data system, create at least two occupational pathways based on regional economic needs, and implement at least four student success strategies from the 2021 Recovery with Equity (RWE) report.

As regions work together to develop their career pathways, it is critical to leverage data in our learning and decision-making processes. As stated in California's Data Strategy², robust data and evidence-based approaches can ensure effective programs, improved decision making, and better outcomes for California's residents. Evaluation and analysis give us evidence to understand how programs work, who they serve, and outcomes for students.

The following document drafts a learning agenda, which includes strategic goals and objectives of the program, priority learning questions to address critical knowledge gaps, a set of associated activities to answer them, and deliverables with methods for disseminating findings. This document details evidence-building activities related to each priority area that are ongoing or will occur during the grant cycle (2022 – 2026). Some evidence building activities will fall into multiple priority areas and address multiple questions.

MISSION AND VISION

The mission of the Regional K16 Education Grant Collaborative Program is to support regional collaborative efforts to develop and streamline equitable pathways from high school to postsecondary education and into the workforce. The program aims to help California's economy recover from the COVID-19 pandemic while addressing long-standing social and economic inequities in higher education and workforce participation.

STRATEGIC GOALS

With input from the program's stakeholders, strategic goals for the Regional K16 Education Grant Collaborative Program have been defined as follows:

- 1) Support regional efforts to develop and streamline equitable pathways from high school to postsecondary education into the workforce
- 2) Promote equitable student success strategies based on the 2021 Recovery with Equity (RWE) Report
- 3) Increase utilization of Cradle to Career (C2C) data system and tools
- 4) Foster sustained, spontaneous cross-sector collaboration within each CERF region and with state agencies
- 5) Develop models for best practices in pathway implementation, student support strategies, and flexible granting processes

These five strategic goals are accompanied by priority learning questions, as well as planned or ongoing activities to gather data, evidence, or other deliverables that the Regional K16 Education Collaborative Program will perform over the course of the grant (2022 – 2026). Additionally, interactions between strategic goals and learning questions will be examined to determine how strategies support each other (e.g., if RWE strategies are especially effective in supporting certain career pathways). Given the plan encompasses evaluating all participating regional collaboratives over four-year period, these questions are high-level in nature, and may take many data sources and analytic approaches including foundational fact finding, program evaluation, performance measurement, and policy analysis to fully examine.



LEARNING QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES



Goal 1: Support regional efforts to develop and streamline equitable pathways from high school to postsecondary education into the workforce

The primary goal of the Regional K16 Education Collaborative Program is to support community-based collaboration to develop, expand, and streamline equitable career and education pathways from high school to post-secondary education and into the workforce. Streamlined career pathways with wrap-around supports are a demonstrated way to increase student persistence, credit accumulation, graduation rates, and job attainment while reducing educational costs and closing equity gaps between subgroups^{3,4}.

Regional collaboratives must commit to developing pathways in at least two sectors (Business Management, Education, Engineering / Computing, or Healthcare) based on regional economic and labor market needs. This strategic goal encompasses many student-focused outcomes, including increasing the number of students enrolling in career pathways and post-secondary education, increasing the number of students earning degrees, certificates, and credentials, and increasing the number of residents earning high-wage, high-skill jobs that meet regional needs. The priority questions in this area include assessing each collaborative's pathways at various stages of implementation, assessing the effectiveness of each collaborative's work plan, and developing data collection and analysis strategies.

Priority Questions:

- How are collaboratives approaching pathway development and ensuring equitable access?
- How long does it take to fully establish a career pathway?
- Do certain pathway disciplines have higher student and parent buy-in than others?
- How does pathway participation impact student retention and completion rates?
- What barriers prevent students from transitioning to post-secondary education, and what strategies have been effective in mitigating these challenges?
- How are collaboratives embedding work-based learning opportunities into the pathways?
- How successful are collaboratives in preparing students for and helping students secure high-wage, high-skill jobs after pathway completion?
- Are students securing jobs that align with their pathway participation and meet the region's economic and labor market needs?
- What equity gaps exist in pathway participation, retention, engagement, and completion?

Evidence Building Activities

The Regional K16 Education Collaborative Program will execute a broad range of evidence-building activities to answer these priority questions. Activities include but are not limited to program evaluation, foundational fact-finding, performance measurement, and policy analysis. K16 program staff will work directly with each collaborative to develop a customized data and evaluation plan. Utilizing data from each collaborative, K16 program

staff can begin to compile summaries of baseline data such as the number of students participating in each career pathway, retention rates, degree and certificate attainment, the number of students participating in work-based learning opportunities, and the number of students earning quality jobs post-pathway completion. Additionally, descriptive analyses of each collaborative's approach to implementing career pathways will be compiled based on their work plan. Collaboratives will report updated data twice per year, which will then be consolidated and analyzed by K16 program staff. Once the collaboratives have established their pathway programs, data will be examined to identify any potential pain points or roadblocks along the pathway. If equity gaps or pain points are identified, K16 program staff can work with collaboratives on exploratory analysis such as conducting focus groups to better understand potential challenges and mitigation strategies.



Goal 2: Promote equitable student success strategies based on the 2021 Recovery with Equity Report

The Regional K16 Education Collaborative program is dedicated to promoting equitable student success strategies based on the findings of the Governor's 2021 Recovery with Equity Report⁵. This report provides 11 actionable recommendations based in equity-driven, student-centered strategies, policies, and practices aimed to help California's post-secondary institutions recover from the pandemic stronger and with equitable outcomes for all students. These recommendations are centered around four guiding principles: foster inclusive institutions, streamline pathways to degrees, facilitate student transitions, and simplify supports for student stability. Regional collaboratives must commit to implementing at least four of the following seven recommendations:

- Improve faculty, staff, and administrator diversity
- Cultivate inclusive, engaging, and equity-oriented learning environments
- Retain students through inclusive supports
- Provide high-tech, high-touch advising
- Support college preparation and early credit
- Subsidize Internet access for eligible students
- Improve college affordability

This strategic goal will have a wide range of targeted outcomes, dependent on each recommendation. Outcomes will range from utilizing employee data, surveys, focus groups, and resource participation. Therefore, priority questions for this strategic goal are focused on questions assessing each collaborative's chosen RWE recommendations at various stages of implementation, assessing the effectiveness of each collaborative's work plan, and developing data collection and analysis strategies.

Priority Questions:

- How effective are RWE-related programs and policies at mitigating student challenges and roadblocks to equitable pathway participation?
- Are certain RWE strategies especially effective for pathway disciplines?
- Do RWE strategies impact pathway participants differently than non-pathway students?

- To what extent does participating in Dual Enrollment and Dual Credit opportunities reduce time to degree and increase college readiness?
- How do course-redesigns to cultivate inclusive, equity-oriented learning environments impact student sense of belonging and course outcomes?
- How does implementing wrap-around inclusive support impact student retention?
- How does participating in high-tech, high-touch advising impact student retention and streamline transitions between institutions?
- To what extent are regions able to increase faculty, staff, and administrator diversity?

Evidence Building Activities

K16 program staff will implement varied activities to answer these priority questions including foundational fact finding, program evaluation, qualitative analysis such as focus groups and interviews, and performance measurement. As mentioned in Strategic Goal one, K16 program staff will work directly with each collaborative to develop a customized data and evaluation plan which will include metrics measuring each implemented RWE recommendation area. Utilizing data from each collaborative, K16 program staff can begin to compile summaries of baseline data including but not limited to the number of students participating in Dual Enrollment / Dual Credit opportunities, the number of college credits earned from early credit opportunities, and the subject areas of Dual Credit courses, campus climate survey results, participation in student support programs and resources, use of high-tech advising tools, student course evaluations, demographics of faculty, staff, and administrator diversity, the number of students completing FAFSA / CADAA applications, and results from student interviews and focus groups. Collaboratives will work with K16 program staff to develop a customized data plan where they will report on a combination of required and custom metrics to track RWE strategy outcomes. Collaboratives will report updated data twice per year, which will then be consolidated and analyzed by the K16 program. Continued progress towards implementing the RWE goals will be monitored and summarized both aggregate reports and case studies (see Strategic Goal 5 for more details).



Goal 3: Increase utilization of Cradle to Career (C2C) data system and tools

The Cradle to Career (C2C) system will be a suite of user-friendly resources focused on early learning through K-12 and higher education, as well as on the financial aid and social services that help students reach their goals. The data system will include dashboards, query tools, and analytic data sets for researchers, policy makers, educators, and community members to inform research, advocacy, and policy analysis.

CaliforniaColleges.edu is the state's official college and career planning and application platform for 6th-12th grade students. It provides an infrastructure for unified and verified reporting from K12 districts that are receiving funds as part of the regional workforce collaboratives. CaliforniaColleges.edu is managed by the California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI) which also provides training, capacity building, and user support to districts as they integrate CaliforniaColleges.edu into their work with students. They aim to provide California students and parents guidance on college and career planning, college eligibility

monitoring, as well as providing educators and educational systems with data and tools to support students from an evidence-based framework. CCGI also forms the core of the Cradle to Career System's college and career planning tools, which further aligns K12 partners in participation of the State's data system.

One of the key goals of the K-16 Education Collaborative Program is to increase utilization of the C2C data system and tools for collaborative partners, with all K-12 partners formally partnering with CCGI. As more systems regularly upload their data into the C2C system, K16 collaborative pathway students' data can be identified across the C2C system. This will lead to the development of robust longitudinal data sets that track student retention and persistence from K12, into college, and onto the workforce. These unique cross-sector datasets can be leveraged by researchers at the state, regional researchers, collaboratives, or third-party consortiums to conduct innovative analyses. The potential insights gained on pathway and program effectiveness would be invaluable, as these datasets would be some of the first of their kind to contain such detailed, multi-system information for each student.

Priority Questions:

- What insights can be gleaned from the C2C longitudinal datasets?
- How can the state leverage C2C data to develop analytic and evaluative dashboards?
- What successes do districts have in the CCGI implementation process?
- What roadblocks do districts face when implementing CCGI at their districts, and how are they mitigated?
- How many students and parents are utilizing CCGI tools?
- How are the transcript-informed tools being used to support the collaborative's goals?

Evidence Building Activities

The primary measurement for this strategic goal will be to establish cohort based longitudinal data sets of collaborative pathway participants in the C2C system. Additionally, a baseline of the number of K12 districts in each region's collaborative currently participating in CCGI will be established. Bi-yearly progress on the number of partners that either are in contract with CCGI or have implemented the tools will be tracked and updated over the course of the grant cycle. Additional evidence can be measured through a variety of sources, including interviews and case studies with advisors, feedback surveys from students and parents, and student participation data from CCGI.



Strategic Goal 4: Support spontaneous, sustained collaboration in each CERF region

In addition to supporting collaboratives to build career pathways for their region, another driving purpose of the K16 Education Collaboratives Program is to support spontaneous, sustained collaboration within Community Economic Resilience Fund (CERF) regions across the state. The state of California is incredibly diverse, with each region having unique strengths to build upon and challenges to address. Like the foundation of the Regional K16 Education Collaborative Program, CERF was created to promote a sustainable and

equitable recovery from the economic distress of COVID-19 by supporting new plans and strategies to diversify local economies and develop sustainable industries that create high-quality, broadly accessible jobs for all Californians⁶. The regions are defined in a way that promotes geographic equity and is consistent with existing economic development efforts as well as other state definitions of regional economic and labor markets. As the intent of the Regional K16 Education Collaborative Program is to incentivize regional education and workforce collaboration to make a significant impact on the regional economy, the CERF regions serve as a guiding framework. Within each region, local collaboratives have been working diligently to complete innovative programs and initiatives for many years. These home-grown collaborative efforts bring together key stakeholders that are experts in understanding their region's needs. However, often collaboration may be isolated to a particular sub-area of a CERF region, partners may not have capacity to participate regularly in collaborative efforts, or cross-sector relationships may not be fully developed.

In addition to supporting collaborative relationships within CERF regions, State agencies also play a large role in collaborative efforts. In many cases, the state is farther removed from the partners who are doing the critical groundwork. These are the individuals who best understand the challenges and roadblocks faced in implementing state policies. Moving forward, the state can also act as a key stakeholder and collaborator with each region having a more direct line of communication. For example, if collaboratives identify a particular policy issue that is blocking them from being able to effectively implement these programs, they can have a direct channel to raise these concerns and the state can work together with the regions to revise the ineffective policies. In turn, the state can establish a more effective and responsive policy cycle.

It is the mission of the Regional K16 Education Collaborative Program to support stakeholders in each region to strengthen collaborative efforts, include additional partners, and build a system that sustains collaboration post-grant. This sustainability can come from a theory of change at the regional level by encouraging regions to serve their big-picture missions by braiding new projects and funding opportunities into their ongoing work. As collaboratives mature and governance structures stabilize, this will be a critical component of sustaining collaborative efforts.

Priority Questions:

- To what extent does meeting regularly as a collaborative increase the number of project goals achieved?
- How are collaboratives expanding their efforts to new partners, both in education and from the workforce?
- What roadblocks to partners face in building trust, capacity, and sustained relationships, and how are these mitigated?
- How has this project work impacted relationships with other collaboratives in the region?
- Does time spent collaborating take away from time to do other necessary project work?
- Do different types of governance / award structures lead to improved partner relationships and collaboration?
- How does collaboration for the K16 regional education collaboratives program sustain collaboration for other related projects (e.g., the CERF grant, state mandates, other funding opportunities).

Evidence Building Activities

The program will conduct a series of activities to measure increased collaboration, including assisting in developing customized work plans for each collaborative that include regular steering committee and workgroup meetings, documenting each collaborative's process and governance structure, performance measurement, and policy analysis. Based on a study assessing mental health collaboration activities among California K-12 schools and other partners⁷ a survey will be distributed to regional partners assessing the development, quality, and effectiveness of collaborative work. This survey will examine governance, structure, function, and nature of collaborative activities, opinions on the effectiveness of collaboration in project implementation, and perceptions of on-going challenges and successes. Findings from this survey could be streamlined and question banked to help other collaborative projects across the state assess their collaborative efforts. Throughout the grant, K16 program staff can continue to monitor the collaboratives' progress and identify regions that have especially embedded the spirit of collaboration into their programmatic efforts.



Goal 5: Develop models for best practices in pathway implementation, student support strategies, and flexible granting processes

The K16 Collaborative Education Grant Program is unique in that it aims to embed the spirit of collaboration within its own processes in addition to fostering collaboration within each CERF region. Therefore, we aim to encourage each region take ownership of their collaborative activities. The K16 program will work with each region's collaborative team to customize a data plan based on their individual goals and pathway plans. This allows each collaborative the agency to create baselines on metrics that make sense for their regions. As each collaborative takes their own approach to their work, the K16 Education Collaborative Program will continue to monitor progress and identify innovative and effective practices across the regions. This could include the pathway designs themselves, the ways in which the RWE strategies are implemented, or how the collaboratives are working together to achieve their goals. In addition to understanding best practices for pathway and RWE strategies independently, examining the interactions between them will be critically important. For example, some RWE strategies may be particularly effective in certain pathway disciplines.

Determining best practices for flexible granting structures will also be important. As the K16 Collaborative Education Grant Program is taking a unique approach in taking the role of an additional collaborative partner rather than a traditional granting agency, it will be critical to evaluate our own processes. Understanding the effectiveness of our approach and whether this model should be replicated in future operations will be a key learning activity for the grant project.

Priority Questions:

- What are best practices for pathway implementation?
- What are best practices for RWE strategy implementation?
- How do pathway implementations and RWE strategies interact with one another?
- How can a granting agency provide flexibility in their process and to their grantees?
- Is a flexible granting structure an effective approach to collaborative working, both with the state and within each region?

Evidence Building activities

K16 program staff will develop case studies to highlight the best practices from collaboratives across the state, which can include foundational fact finding, program evaluation, qualitative analyses of interviews and focus groups, and performance evaluation. In addition to documenting the processes of each collaborative's implementation plan, the K16 Education Collaborative Program will need to document its own processes as a granting agent. This can be achieved through interviewing stakeholders about challenges and successes across the grant cycle. Documenting the flexible and collaborative granting process as a state agency will be summarized into a technical report and can be disseminated to other state agencies and granting agents. It is critical to share the identified best practices at a wide scale, and one avenue for disseminating findings could include a convening at the end of the grant cycle for each collaborative to present on their work and best practices.

CONCLUSION

Developing supportive and streamlined career pathways through regional collaboration will be a significant undertaking. Over the course of the grant, we will continue to learn as new questions and evidence arise. Though a daunting effort ahead, each collaborative is comprised of expert partners that are passionate and deeply committed to the students of their region. Through collaboration, we can work together to create an equitable, supportive, and responsive system for all learners that generates high-quality career opportunities that drive California's vibrant economy.

REFERENCES

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