

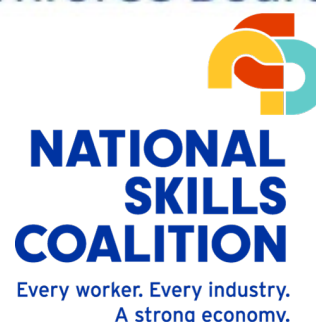
# Career Pathway Programs & Equity



**International Rescue Committee  
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## Career Pathway Programs & Equity

In 2021, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) brought together 12 key stakeholders – practitioners, policymakers, and funders – to have a year-long dialogue about increasing equity within career pathway programs. The conversations were engaging, spirited, and unfolding in a time of where national conversations about economic recovery, low-wage workers, race, immigration, and opportunity were abundant. While it was a diverse group of stakeholders, we were proud to be able to build strong consensus around key strategies to make career pathway programs more equitable in terms of access and outcomes. We also agreed we all have a role to play. On behalf of the *2021 Career Pathways, Equity, and Community Working Group* we are pleased to share highlights of this work below.



With additional contributions from **Stuart Andreason - Assistant Vice President and Director of the Center for Workforce and Economic Opportunity at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.**

Career pathway programs can be understood as a series of structured and connected skills training activities and support services that enable people – often low-wage, working adults - to increase their skills and advance to better jobs over time. In the American workforce, where people of color, immigrant workers, and other diverse communities consistently face lower wages, are less likely to be in a high-quality job, and often struggle with significantly higher rates of unemployment, career pathway programs offer an opportunity to support people in moving into better jobs. To do so, career pathway programs must work for the people who need them most.

In our work, we were focused on advancing equity in career pathway programming. In this context, equity means meeting communities where they are and allocating resources and opportunities as needed to create equal outcomes for all community members. We thought about advancing equity within diverse communities – including people of color, English language learners, individuals with varying immigration statuses, and those with lower levels of formal education. We were mindful of the data and research available on the reach and outcome(s) of past career pathway programs but also drew on our lived experience as practitioners, policymakers, and funders working in this space.

Finally, there is a timeliness and urgency to this work. The U.S. is deeply invested in economy recovery after the labor market shocks and economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, we are offered a great opportunity to do this work with an explicit, intentional focus on equity. In the past year, in a historic moment, our nation welcomed thousands of humanitarian immigrants from Afghanistan once again signaling that we strive to be a welcoming nation and know that our communities and workforce will continue to diversify. American businesses and workers are contending with a labor market unlike any in recent memory. In short, now is a critical moment to bring an equity-lens to career pathway work and embrace the practice, policy, and funding changes necessary to ensure these programs advance career and economic well-being for all.

# Building Career Pathway Programs That Advance Equity

## Program Design

- ✓ The voices of participants and frontline staff are important we must work to enable their presence in design conversations
- ✓ Many of the most critical supports and services are considered “outside” the umbrella of career pathway programming – things like childcare, help with transportation, and excellent case management – and they need to be brought in and considered critical components of career pathway programming
- ✓ We simply must get better at designing programs that are manageable for working adults and that means more flexible and part-time programs, more employer-based programs, and more earn and learn models
- ✓ Past approaches to engaging employers in program design may be less effective with today’s employers and we need to rethink how we cultivate and build this engagement especially with non-traditional employers such as temporary staffing companies and gig economy platforms
- ✓ Positive outcomes including job placement, increased earnings, and increased skill attainment are not at odds with a focus on equity and, it is through flexibility – in timelines, program components, and use of resources – that we can best balance a commitment to outcomes that are both positive and equitable



## Funding

- ✓ Career pathway programs need co-investment from government, industry, and private philanthropy and more conversations need to be had about how this can best be structured, especially given the dynamism in the economy and labor market
- ✓ Sometimes, it is basic resource constraints that limit centering equity in career pathway work but just as often, it is the lack of flexibility in using those resources that gets in the way
- ✓ “Unfunded labor” in serving diverse populations in career pathway programs is a big problem with many small, grassroots organizations doing a lot of work to help people access and persist in career pathway programs. Surfacing, scoping, and addressing issues of “unfunded labor” is an important step in building sustainable career pathway programs that can advance equity

## Narrative

- ✓ A simple narrative of how programs and services are “open to everyone” does not advance equity - stakeholders need to do the work of practically and operationally ensuring that programs are truly accessible to everyone
- ✓ We embrace the narrative that career pathway programs can lead to better economic opportunities but this is only half the story – we also need to talk about how the economic opportunities available in many middle skill jobs are significantly influenced by the race, gender, and immigrant status of the workers that traditionally hold those jobs

***“Basic resource constraints can limit equity in career pathway work but just as often, it is the lack of flexibility in using these resources that is the limitation”***



## We All Have a Role to Play

### Practitioners can:

- ✓ Regularly review program data including demographics and outcomes to identify who is being served by career pathway program(s) and who is not
- ✓ Identify any patterns in outcome(s) attainment among different populations and use this data in all internal program design conversations
- ✓ Be intentional and proactive in inviting participants and frontline staff to provide input about their needs, experiences, and ideas on program design; ensure that this time and effort is compensated
- ✓ Advocate, innovate, collaborate, and fundraise to pilot new and non-traditional program components within a career pathway program; share learnings on how these program components contribute to equitable access and success for specific populations
- ✓ Understand the role that all practitioner(s) play in a career pathway program and make sure that all practitioners in a project team are equitably and appropriately resourced to do the work necessary to implement the program; be sensitive to the power dynamics among partners that may prevent this from happening organically

### Policymakers can:

- ✓ Require greater data collection and disaggregation so that communities, stakeholders, and key decision-makers can better see patterns of access, participation, and outcomes among diverse populations; develop benchmarks and outcome goals that emphasize equity alongside traditional performance goals
- ✓ Revise income-based/employment status-based eligibility requirements to ensure that working low-to-moderate income (LMI) populations can participate in career pathway programs alongside unemployed and extremely low-income populations
- ✓ Identify opportunities to broaden access to career pathway programs for individuals with different immigration status(es)
- ✓ Incentivize state and local creativity within the bounds of federal frameworks; provide technical assistance to state and local workforce development boards that encourages reasonable innovation and risk-taking, while mitigating fears that pursuing creative models will leave stakeholders vulnerable to disproportionate consequences regarding performance, compliance, or financial liability
- ✓ Participate in and link to policy conversations in critical adjacent areas including expanding access to affordable childcare, housing, and transportation

## Funders can:

- ✓ Be flexible and open-minded in thinking about key program elements such as cost-per-participant, timelines, and the inclusion of specific program components; use RFPs and the funding process to learn more about the why behind specific requests
- ✓ Incentivize the adoption of career pathway program models that have both strong outcomes and demonstrate success in equitably reaching and serving diverse populations; be open to ongoing needs for local and population-specific contextualization of these models
- ✓ Resource and support collaborative/collective efforts that ensure a strong voice represents diverse worker needs and interests in policymaking settings, from workforce investment boards to economic development planning
- ✓ Be a strategic partner in dialogue about the full cost of career pathway programs; be intentional in thinking about how the power dynamics of these conversations impact how costs are understood, calculated, and presented, especially among institutional and non-institutional partners
- ✓ Galvanize funders across spheres – philanthropy, government, impact investment, private sector employers – to engage in a shared conversation about the role(s) that each can and should play in ensuring that all US workers can learn about, prepare for, and enter careers that provide meaningful economic security and mobility

