

Cultivating State Capacity to Build Our Nation's Career Readiness Infrastructure: Leveraging Federal Support

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Abstract

This study analyzes the language of five key federal legislative acts (ESSA, Perkins, HEA, YWRA, and WIOA) to identify opportunities to leverage federal support and resources more effectively in strengthening career readiness initiatives. Using Individualized Career Plan (ICP) as a framework, a two-step data analysis process combining thematic analysis and artificial intelligence was employed to examine the legislative language. Our findings indicate that while all of the legislative acts share common goals of promoting the future workforce, notable discrepancies exist in areas of focus and the extent to which they fund activities centered around comprehensive career advising and individualized career planning. The results indicate that WIOA provides the most detailed guidance for the seven components of quality ICPs and therefore can be used as model policy language for the other legislative acts. The model language provides insights and recommendations for policymakers to consider when making legislative amendments.

Keywords: Legislative analysis; WIOA; Career advising; Individualized Career Plan

1. Introduction

Career readiness has become an increasingly important focus in education and workforce development, as the modern job market demands a diverse range of skills and competencies beyond traditional academic knowledge. However, current U.S. federal legislation tends to prioritize college preparation and often fails to adequately address the crucial connections between education and career, leading to a disconnect between the skills students acquire in school and the demands of the workforce (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016; Malin et al., 2017; Stone, 2013). This study aims to bridge this gap by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the language used in five key federal legislative acts: the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins), the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Youth Workforce Readiness Act (YWRA), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). By examining the specific language within these acts that either directly allocates funding or permits the use of funds for career readiness programs and services, we seek to leverage federal support and resources

more effectively and establish a strong alignment between federal and state policies. The challenge is to ensure that career readiness programs and services align with national priorities while addressing the specific challenges faced by high-need, high-opportunity youth.

The emphasis on college readiness has overshadowed the importance of developing a wide range of career pathways and opportunities for students. A study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that only 55.3% of college graduates in 2020 reported having participated in an internship, co-op, or other work experience related to their field of study (NACE, 2021). This lack of real-world experience and exposure to diverse career options can hinder students' ability to make informed decisions about their future and successfully transition into the workforce. Furthermore, employers place a high value on skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and communication, with 91% of employers agreeing that these skills are more important than a candidate's specific major (AAC&U, 2021). However, many students graduate from high school and college without sufficient opportunities to develop and demonstrate these essential career skills, leaving them ill-prepared to meet the demands of the modern workforce.

A report by the National Skills Coalition reveals that 52% of jobs in the country require skills training beyond a high school diploma but not necessarily a four-year degree (National Skills Coalition, 2020). It should be noted, however, that earning a four-year degree still significantly increases an individual's chances of securing higher wages compared to those with only a high school diploma or a two-year degree. In 2021, the median hourly wage for those with a bachelor's degree was \$33.35, compared to \$24.08 for those with an associate's degree and \$20.40 for those with a high school diploma (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Yet, many students are not provided with sufficient guidance, resources, or opportunities to explore and pursue a wide range of educational and training opportunities. Research has shown that providing career guidance and counseling can have a positive impact on students' career development, leading to increased self-awareness, improved decision-making skills, and better alignment between education and career goals (Kirkpatrick et al., 2020; Solberg et al., 2020). Without this crucial exposure and access to career advising and resources, students' options are limited, hindering their ability to acquire the skills necessary for high-demand, high-paying career opportunities.

The purpose of this study is to address these shortcomings by analyzing federal legislation and identifying opportunities to strengthen the connections between education and the workplace. By examining the language used in ESSA, Perkins, HEA, YWRA, and WIOA, we aim to uncover funding streams and allowable activities that can be leveraged to support comprehensive career readiness programs. This analysis will provide valuable insights into how federal legislation can be better aligned with the needs of the modern workforce and ensure that students are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary for long-term career success.

2. Literature Review

A study by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce projected that by 2027, 70% of all jobs in the United States will require some form of postsecondary education or training (Carnevale et al., 2021). This projection emphasizes the growing importance of education beyond high school in preparing individuals for the evolving demands of the workforce. By examining the effectiveness of workforce development programs in the United States, Holzer (2015) argues that federal legislation, such as WIOA, can play a critical role in promoting the alignment between workforce development programs and labor market needs by encouraging collaboration between education, workforce, and industry partners.

It is crucial to provide students with a wide range of learning opportunities that align with labor market needs in order to meet the increasing demand for postsecondary education and training. These learning opportunities include internships, apprenticeships, dual enrollment programs, and other work-based learning experiences that help students develop the skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen career pathways. Students who participate in these types of learning opportunities have shown positive outcomes

in terms of future earnings. Hernández-Gantes et al. (2018) explored the impact of work-based learning on student outcomes in CTE programs. The authors found that students who participated in WBL experiences had better employment outcomes and higher earnings than those who did not. The study highlighted that legislation, such as Perkins, could provide funding and support for quality WBL experiences.

Reed et al. (2012) also examined the effectiveness of registered apprenticeship programs in the United States. The authors found that participants in these programs had significantly higher earnings and employment rates compared to nonparticipants. The study underscored the potential of apprenticeships and highlighted the role of federal legislation, such as WIOA and Perkins, in supporting the expansion of the apprenticeship programs.

By allowing high school students to take college courses and earn postsecondary credit, dual enrollment/early college programs, have also been identified as a promising strategy for promoting career readiness. Students who participated in dual enrollment programs were more likely to enroll in college, earn a degree, and have higher earnings than those who did not (Zinth & Barnett, 2018). The study showed the potential of dual enrollment as a bridge between secondary and postsecondary education, highlighting the role of federal legislation, such as Perkins and HEA, in supporting dual enrollment programs.

In the provision of career development opportunities, equity and access are also crucial considerations. This is particularly important for students from diverse backgrounds, who may face additional barriers to accessing and benefiting from career advising and learning opportunities. Giani (2019) investigated the impact of ESSA on career readiness initiatives in K-12 education and found that while the legislation provided new opportunities for states and districts to promote career readiness, there were still significant disparities in access to these opportunities, particularly for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

Providing comprehensive support services is essential for helping those from diverse backgrounds successfully navigate the career development process. Students who were engaged in individualized career plans were more likely to have higher grades, better attendance, and lower dropout rates compared to those who did not (Solberg et al., 2012). The study emphasized the critical role of school counselors in providing career advising and support services, particularly for underserved students. Mentoring programs have also been shown to be effective in supporting students' career development. Students who participated in a mentoring program reported higher levels of career self-efficacy and were more likely to pursue their career goals compared to those who did not participate in the program (Linnehan, 2001). The study highlighted the importance of providing students with access to mentors who can offer guidance, support, and exposure to different career pathways.

Despite the evidence supporting the importance of comprehensive support services, such as individualized career plans, in promoting student career readiness, these services are not adequately reflected in existing federal legislation. The National Career Development Association (NCDA) has repeatedly called for increased funding and support for career counseling services in schools, arguing that current policies do not prioritize these essential supports (NCDA, 2021). Only a small percentage of students have access to comprehensive career counseling services, with many schools lacking the resources and trained personnel to provide these supports (CCD, 2019). This lack of access is particularly acute for students from diverse backgrounds, who may benefit the most from these services (Solberg & Ali, 2017).

WIOA acknowledges the importance of career guidance and counseling services as part of its workforce development initiatives. While it does not explicitly mandate or provide dedicated funding for career counseling services, it does allow for the provision of these services within its broader scope. States and local agencies have the flexibility to allocate resources toward career guidance and counseling as part of their WIOA implementation plans (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Perkins V requires states to

describe how they will provide career exploration and career development coursework, activities, or services in their state plans (Advance CTE, 2021). However, it does not provide dedicated funding specifically for career counseling services.

As a result, the availability and quality of career counseling services vary widely across states and districts, leaving many students without access to the support they need to make informed decisions about their education and career paths (ASCA, 2019). To address the shortcomings in existing federal legislation, policymakers should consider amendments that prioritize and provide targeted funding for comprehensive career counseling services, particularly for underserved student populations (Malin et al., 2017). Such changes at the policy level are necessary to ensure that all students have access to the support and guidance they need to successfully navigate education and training opportunities leading them to high-demand, high-wage careers.

3. Theoretical Framework: Individualized Career Plans

In the United States, individualized career plans (ICP) refer to a program of personalized career services offered throughout the lifespan that facilitates meaningful self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management skills designed to connect individuals to the learning opportunities and occupational pathways needed to achieve social mobility and the accumulation of generational wealth. Table 1 provides definitions for the seven components of individualized career plans (Solberg et al., 2018). While these definitions provide a foundation for understanding ICPs, they continue to be refined to ensure they remain relevant and aligned with current labor market demands. ICP also highlights the role of career specialists in designing career planning activities, while educators, employers, and families are involved in facilitating these activities (Perry & Shannon, 2017).

Table 1. Definitions of Career Advising and Individualized Career Plan (CA/ICP) Components

Career Advising/Coaching Component	Definition
Self-exploration	Increasing awareness of their talent and skills
Career-exploration	Engaging in the exploration of how their talent and skills are relevant to a range of occupational pathway opportunities
Goal setting	Increasing long-term aspirational goals and supporting access to the education and occupational pathways needed to pursue those goals
Career planning	Developing long-term plans and timelines for navigating into the educational/training opportunities needed to pursue their occupational goals
Learning opportunities	Identifying learning opportunities including courses, connected learning pathways, stackable credentials, work-based learning opportunities, and postsecondary options that align with their interests and will develop the skills needed for them to pursue their goals
Durable and technical skills	Identifying the durable and technical skills needed to pursue their occupational goals and options for developing and communicating these skills
Resources	Connecting them to resources (e.g., academic, tutoring, and research) that support their pathway to completing the requirements necessary to pursue their goals

Career Advising/Coaching Setting	Description
Secondary school	Career advising programs offer structured learning opportunities for students to explore how their talent and skills are transferable into high-wage, high-demand pathways, encourage them to consider dual credit/early college and work-based learning opportunities that align with those pathways, and develop postsecondary and workforce development opportunities following high school graduation
Higher education	Career advising programs/coaching ensure that students are aware of the relevance of pursuing the high-wage, high-demand pathways and access the resources needed to successfully complete their non-degree or degree program

Throughout an individual's early life, from childhood to adolescence, individualized career plans (ICPs) are known by various names, such as Personalized Career and Academic Plans (PCAP), although the specific terminology may differ from state to state. During these formative years, ICPs focus on exposing children and young people to positive role models through various media, including books and work-based learning experiences.

As students progress from middle school to high school, they engage in meaningful career-related discussions with mentors, including family members, teachers, and employers. These conversations are complemented by a broader range of work-based learning opportunities and encouragement to participate in early college experiences, particularly those that lead to industry-recognized credentials or certificates upon graduation.

By the time students reach middle school, they are introduced to career-related technologies that allow them to explore a wide array of potential life and career paths. These tools help them understand the educational and workforce development options that are financially viable and can lead to well-paying jobs. This process enables students to make informed decisions about their future, ensuring they are well-prepared for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

As individuals transition into adulthood, the emphasis on Academic Plans diminishes, and the use of Individualized Career Plans (ICPs) becomes more suitable for their ongoing personal and professional development. ICPs are utilized in various settings, including postsecondary institutions, workplaces, and One-Stop Career Centers, offering a structured approach to providing career services (Smith et al., 2021). ICP programs and activities help people navigate pathways that lead to stable employment and wages, promoting social mobility and the accumulation of generational wealth (Sampson et al., 2020). By engaging in the ICP process, adults can make informed decisions about their career trajectories, ensuring they are well-positioned to achieve their long-term objectives and maintain financial security (Hawkins et al., 2020).

4. Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to perform a comprehensive analysis of the language used in federal legislation that requires and allows career readiness activities to be designed and implemented across the nation. To accomplish this, we conducted an extensive review of five federal legislative acts, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins), the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Youth Workforce Readiness Act (YWRA), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). During this review process, we identified and extracted specific language that either directly allocates funding or permits the use of funds for activities and initiatives that align with the definitions of career advising and individualized career planning. By identifying these funding opportunities and allowances, we aim to leverage federal support and resources

more effectively and establish a strong alignment between federal and state policies, leading to enhanced career readiness capacity among our target populations. The study findings will ensure that our career readiness programs and services are in harmony with national goals and priorities.

4.1 Data Collection

For each piece of federal legislation (ESSA, Perkins, HEA, YWRA, and WIOA), a spreadsheet was created to capture and organize relevant language related to career readiness activities and funding. The spreadsheet included columns for the section number where the language was located within the legislation and the exact copy of the language itself. To ensure a granular level of analysis, each sentence of the identified language was entered into a separate row, even if it originated from the same section of the legislation. This approach allowed for precise coding and alignment with specific career readiness activities and definitions outlined in Career Advising and Individualized Career Plans (Table 1).

4.2 Data Coding

Once the legislative language had been captured in the spreadsheets, a team of researchers convened to systematically review and code the data. The coding process involved careful consideration and discussion among the research team to ensure consistency and accuracy in categorizing the language according to our initial set of career readiness definitions.

Additional columns were added to the spreadsheets as different types of career readiness activities emerged.

4.3 Data Analysis

To analyze the vast amount of data collected from the five federal legislative acts, we employed a two-step process that combined thematic analysis and artificial intelligence. First, the research team conducted a thorough thematic analysis of the coded data to identify patterns within and across the legislative acts. This process involved carefully examining the coded language and grouping similar concepts and ideas together to form overarching themes.

In the second step, we used Claude AI (Anthropic, n.d.), an advanced large language model system, to confirm our findings and conduct a comparative analysis across the legislative acts. Claude AI was particularly helpful in identifying and extracting key discrepancies, unique terminologies, and areas of alignment among the five pieces of legislation. By leveraging the natural language processing capabilities of Claude AI, we were able to quickly and accurately compare the data, revealing subtle differences that may have been overlooked through manual analysis alone. The insights generated by Claude AI complemented and reinforced the findings derived from our traditional data analysis methods, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the federal landscape related to career readiness.

5. Findings

The analysis of the language used in the five legislative acts, including ESSA, Perkins, HEA, YWRA, and WIOA, revealed commonalities and discrepancies across the acts in relation to career readiness and workforce preparation. In particular, the study found notable discrepancies in the terminology and areas of focus, presenting opportunities for alignment and collaboration.

5.1 Commonalities

The five acts share some common ground in recognizing the importance of career exploration activities that expose individuals to career options. For example, Perkins V includes "career exploration and career development activities" as part of the requirements for state plans (Perkins V, Sec. 122(d)(4)(B)(i)). YWRA focuses on exposing youth to a wide range of career options and pathways, not limited to any specific educational or occupational sector, by "provid[ing] exposure to a broad range of career fields, using labor market information and occupational outlooks to inform career exploration and planning, and including nontraditional fields" (YWRA, Sec. 129(c)(1)(C)(vi)). The acts also encourage individuals to

identify long-term goals and develop plans and timelines for navigating educational and training opportunities aligned with their career goals, though the specific requirements around long-term goal setting vary. For instance, WIOA states that an individual employment plan shall “identify the employment goals, appropriate achievement objectives, and appropriate combination of services for the participant to achieve the employment goals” (WIOA, Sec. 134(c)(2)(A)(xii)(II)).

There is a common emphasis on the need to provide diverse learning opportunities, such as courses, credentials, work-based learning experiences, and postsecondary options. WIOA, for example, emphasizes the importance of providing “access to education and training leading to a recognized postsecondary credential (including an industry-recognized certificate or certification, as well as a license, or an associate or baccalaureate degree)” (WIOA, Sec. 3(52)). The acts generally acknowledge the importance of connecting individuals to resources like academic support and advising/coaching, although they differ in how explicitly this is stated. YWRA requires Youth Workforce Investment Activities to include “supportive services” (YWRA, Sec. 129(c)(2)(G)), which can include academic support and advising/coaching. WIOA mentions the provision of “information, in formats that are usable by and understandable to one-stop center customers, relating to the availability of supportive services or assistance” (WIOA, Sec. 134(c)(2)(A)(ix)).

Additionally, the acts promote stakeholder collaboration involving educators, employers, and others in supporting career readiness efforts. For instance, Perkins V requires local applications to describe “how students, teachers, representatives of business and industry, labor organizations, representatives of Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations, as appropriate, representatives of special populations, and other interested individuals are involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of career and technical education programs” (Perkins V, Sec. 134(b)(5)).

Beyond these broad commonalities, however, the acts have notable discrepancies in their specific language, areas of focus, and the extent to which they fund activities explicitly centered around comprehensive career advising and individualized career planning.

5.2 Discrepancies

While ESSA and HEA do not significantly focus on self-exploration, WIOA mentions identifying individual skills as part of its individualized career services including “comprehensive and specialized assessments of the skill levels and service needs of adults and dislocated workers, which may include - (aa) diagnostic testing and use of other assessment tools” (WIOA, Sec. 134(c)(2)(A)(xii)(I)).

While the acts encourage individuals to develop plans aligned with their career goals, the difference is that HEA focuses on academic planning for degree attainment, which can support career goals, while WIOA's focus is on individual employment plans, which can support the alignment with workforce needs. Individual employment plan includes “the employment goal (including, in appropriate circumstances, nontraditional employment), appropriate achievement objectives, and appropriate services for the participant” (WIOA, Sec. 3(25)(B)(ii)(II)).

In terms of learning opportunities, Perkins prioritizes integrating academic and technical skills through CTE programs and provides “the opportunity for secondary education students to participate in dual or concurrent enrollment programs, early college high school, or competency-based education” (Perkins V, Sec. 135(b)(4)). WIOA strongly promotes work-based learning opportunities, such as “(i) occupational skills training, including training for nontraditional employment; (ii) on-the-job training; (iii) incumbent worker training in accordance with subsection (d)(4); (iv) programs that combine workplace training with related instruction, which may include cooperative education programs” that are aligned with workforce needs. In terms of terminology, ESSA focuses on “credentials of value,” while WIOA introduces terms like “integrated education and training” and “customized training.”

ESSA states that local educational agencies shall “provide access to career counseling and postsecondary education recruitment and preparation, which may include providing access to career counseling to help

students align coursework and postsecondary education plans with future career goals and plans" (ESSA, Sec. 1112(b)(10)(C)(ii)). However, ESSA does not prescribe specific requirements. On the other hand, WIOA requires the provision of career counseling services through one-stop career centers to provide "career guidance and individualized career services to assist such individuals in making informed decisions based on local labor market information and training provider performance information" (WIOA, Sec. 134(c)(2)(F)).

While the five legislative acts share common goals of promoting workforce preparation, they exhibit discrepancies in their areas of focus and terminology, presenting opportunities for alignment and collaboration and implications for policy and practice.

6. Discussion

Our analysis revealed that WIOA provides more detailed guidance related to career readiness, centering on individualized plans, labor market data, experiential learning opportunities, and career counseling services. While improvements could be made, such as reducing overreliance on One-Stop centers for determining career planning access, WIOA presents valuable opportunities to effectively leverage federal resources in this area.

Under WIOA, career readiness programs are categorized as basic services, individualized services, or follow-up services. Basic services provide information on job vacancies, local demand occupations, and skill requirements, while individualized services involve planning, counseling, and transition support activities. Follow-up services target dislocated adult workers or those in unsubsidized employment.

While basic career services are available to all job seekers, individualized career services can only be accessed once American Job Center staff determine that such services are necessary for individuals to obtain or retain employment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015, 2017). However, there is a lack of clear federal or state guidelines on how this determination is made. While One-Stop Career Centers play a crucial role, experts highlight the demand for personalized career advising from certified professionals. A potential WIOA reauthorization strategy is allowing states to fund certified career coaches and vocational psychologists serving disconnected "Opportunity Youth." This would create infrastructure expanding access to specialists guiding individualized plans and goal pursuit for young adults.

Building upon the commonalities and discrepancies identified from the legislative analysis, we propose model language for WIOA organized around the seven components of career advising and individualized career plans. The proposed model language aims to address the inconsistencies identified in the current legislative landscape while leveraging the positive outcomes of engaging in ICP. By incorporating the model language into future reauthorizations and amendments of key legislative acts, such as ESSA, Perkins, HEA, YWRA, and WIOA, policymakers can create a more cohesive, equitable, and effective system of career readiness support for youth, young adults, and adults. We encourage policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to consider adopting this language and integrating it into their respective policies, programs, and practices to promote a more comprehensive and impactful approach to career readiness.

6.1 Suggested Policy Language Aligned with the 7 CA/ICP Components

6.1.1 Self Exploration. The proposed changes to WIOA emphasize the importance of self-exploration in the development of career readiness. Whether it is for school youth, adults, or dislocated workers, activities should include self-exploration and validated self-assessments. The Advisory Committee should be tasked with identifying self-assessment tools. Local plans should describe how self-exploration activities will be incorporated into individualized career planning. Specific language and appropriate section numbers are provided below.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 129(c)(1): In-school, youth activities shall include self-exploration to inform the development of career identity as part of individualized career plans.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(d): Individualized career planning for adults and dislocated workers shall include self-exploration activities and validated self-assessments to identify participant strengths and talent.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 503(b): The Advisory Committee established under this Act shall be charged with evaluating and identifying validated self-assessment tools and instruments to be utilized in the provision of self-exploration activities that increase awareness of individual talents and skills among program participants.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 107(d): Local plans shall describe how self-exploration activities will be incorporated into individualized career planning to help participants identify career pathways aligned to their strengths.

6.1.2 Career Exploration. The proposed changes to WIOA emphasize providing career exploration activities for in-school youth and adults. Collaboration between the Departments of Education and Labor is encouraged to bridge exploration opportunities available in secondary and postsecondary education and training. The definition of youth workforce investment activities is expanded to include individualized career counseling, planning, and exploration. Local agencies are required to provide students with opportunities to develop and update individualized career plans that explore local in-demand occupations. Specific language and appropriate section numbers are provided below.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(c)(2): Local workforce boards shall provide career exploration activities including the development of individualized career plans for in-school youth.
- Add to WIOA Secs. 503 and 169: The interagency agreement between the Department of Education and the Department of Labor shall include provisions to foster collaboration and alignment in providing career exploration activities that bridge opportunities available in secondary and postsecondary education settings as well as workforce training programs.
- Add to WIOA Secs. 3 and 129: "Youth Workforce Investment Activities" shall include activities such as individualized career counseling and planning, career exploration experiences, and guidance on education and training options.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 129(c)(1)(C) on youth activities: Local areas shall provide middle and high school students with opportunities to develop and update individualized career plans that explore local in-demand occupations, career pathways, and aligned education and training options.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(d)(2) on local employment and training activities: Individualized career planning services shall be provided to adults and dislocated workers to explore local career pathways and develop plans to attain credentials and skills needed for high-demand jobs.

6.1.3 Goal Setting. The suggested changes emphasize that youth activities should include guided goal-setting activities where participants identify career and life goals and develop plans to attain the required credentials and experience. Local boards are encouraged to provide career coaching and mentoring to assist individuals with setting career goals and developing plans. The Advisory Committee is tasked with developing best practices for incorporating SMART goal-setting into individualized career plans. Performance measures should include the attainment of short and long-term goals. Specific language and appropriate section numbers are provided below.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 129(c)(1)(C): Youth activities shall include guided goal-setting activities where participants identify career and life aspirations and develop individualized plans outlining the credentials, work experiences, and other requirements necessary to attain stated goals and objectives.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(c)(2)(A)(xii): Local boards shall provide career coaching and mentoring services to program participants to assist such individuals in setting career goals and developing individualized plans to pursue employment and training opportunities aligned with those goals.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 503(b)(3): The Advisory Committee shall develop best practices for incorporating SMART goal-setting into individualized career plans.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 116(b)(2)(A): Local boards shall establish partnerships with businesses to connect individuals to mentors who can provide industry-specific guidance on career goals and planning.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 136(b)(2)(A)(iii): Performance measures shall include attainment of short and long-term goals outlined in individualized career plans.

6.1.4 Career Planning: The proposed changes to WIOA include the development of individualized career plans in a way that outlines the next steps, such as required credentials and work experiences, to attain career goals. The Advisory Committee should be tasked with developing best practices for career plan development, review, and updating. Local boards should provide coaching to assist individuals with identifying training opportunities and work-based learning aligned with career goals. Aligned with goal setting, performance measures should include the attainment of career plan milestones such as the completion of training programs. Specific language and appropriate section numbers are provided below.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 129(c)(1)(C): Youth career activities shall include developing, reviewing, and updating individualized career plans that outline required credentials, work experiences, and other steps to attain career goals.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 503(b)(3): The Advisory Committee shall develop and disseminate best practices and guidelines for the development, periodic review, and updating of individualized career plans for program participants, ensuring such plans provide a structured pathway for pursuing stated career goals and aspirations.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(c)(2)(A)(xii): Local boards shall provide coaching services to program participants to assist in identifying appropriate training programs, work-based learning opportunities, and other activities aligned with the individuals' stated career goals and objectives outlined in their individualized career plans.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 136(b)(2)(A): Performance measures shall include, with respect to participants receiving career services under section 134, measures of the attainment of career plan milestones, including the completion of training programs and other activities identified in the individualized career plans developed for such participants.

6.1.5 Learning Opportunities: The suggested changes highlight that career services should include advising on training programs, apprenticeships, and other work experiences aligned with their individualized career plans, leading to greater access to a wide range of learning opportunities, especially among underserved populations. Local boards should identify and maintain information on local learning opportunities aligned with high-demand career pathways. The interagency agreement should outline the process for sharing data related to available learning opportunities across agencies, in order to support career planning efforts. Specific language and appropriate section numbers are provided below.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(c)(2)(A)(iii): Career services shall include providing workforce counseling and advising services regarding training programs, registered apprenticeship opportunities, work experiences, and other learning activities aligned with the individual's skills and goals identified in their individualized career plan. The delivery of such counseling and advising services shall facilitate access to a comprehensive range of learning opportunities, with focused efforts to promote such access among underserved populations.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 116(b)(2)(A): Local boards shall identify and maintain information on local learning opportunities including On the Job Training (OJT), internships, pre-apprenticeships, dual enrollment, and certifications aligned with high-demand, high-wage career pathways.
- Add to WIOA Secs. 503 and 169(c): The interagency agreement shall delineate procedures and methods for the sharing of data and information pertaining to available learning opportunities, including training programs, apprenticeship opportunities, work-based learning activities, and postsecondary education options, between the Departments and relevant agencies and entities under their purview.

6.1.6 Durable and Technical Skills: The proposed changes to WIOA emphasize the importance of durable and technical skills in building career readiness. Career services should include skills assessments and how an individual's skills connect to high-demand, high-paying occupations. Training services should align to technical and durable skills needed for career goals identified through individualized planning.

The Advisory Committee is tasked with annually reviewing in-demand technical and durable skills to inform individualized career planning, and performance accountability should include metrics on skill gains directly related to individualized career plans. Specific language and appropriate section numbers are provided below.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(c)(2)(A)(iii): Career services shall incorporate comprehensive skills assessments to evaluate an individual's skills and competencies. Such career services shall include guidance on how an individual's identified skills align with high-demand, high-wage occupations to facilitate informed decision-making and planning.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(c)(3)(D): Training services shall include skills development services that align with the technical and durable competencies required for a program participant to attain the career goals and objectives specified in their individualized career plan.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 503(b)(4): The Advisory Committee shall annually review and evaluate data on in-demand technical and durable skills across industries and occupations. The findings of such annual review shall inform the development and updating of individualized career planning resources, tools, and counseling services to ensure alignment between individual career plans and the skills needed for in-demand career pathways.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 136(b)(2)(A)(iv): Performance accountability measures shall incorporate metrics to evaluate the extent to which participants achieve skill gains directly aligned with the technical and durable skills requirements identified in their individualized career plans.

6.1.7 Resources: The suggested changes highlight that funding for youth and adult services under this Act can support the provision of resources needed to complete career readiness activities. One-stop center resources should be leveraged to help participants complete goals in their individualized plans. The interagency agreement should describe shared roles in providing resources to help participants reach goals and milestones in individualized career plans, and the Advisory Committee should catalog federally funded resources that can assist individuals in accomplishing their career goals. Local boards should engage community partners in providing resources to help encourage the participation of underserved populations. Specific language and appropriate section numbers are provided below.

- Add to WIOA Sec. 129(c)(2): Funding for youth services may be utilized to provide supportive services and resources necessary for the successful participation and completion of such activities, including but not limited to transportation and books.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 134(d): One-stop center resources such as academic coaching, mentoring, and counseling shall be leveraged to help participants complete goals in their individualized plans.
- Add to WIOA Secs. 503 and 169(a): The interagency agreement shall delineate the shared roles and responsibilities of participating agencies in delivering supportive services and resources to program participants to facilitate the attainment of goals and milestones specified in their individualized career plans.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 503(b)(2): The Advisory Committee shall maintain a comprehensive catalog of federally funded resources, services, and assistance that may aid program participants in accomplishing the career goals and objectives outlined in their individualized career plans.
- Add to WIOA Sec. 116(b)(2)(A): Local workforce development boards shall actively engage community-based organizations and partners to collaboratively provide supportive services and resources aimed at addressing barriers that may impede the full participation of underserved populations in career readiness activities authorized under this Act.

7. Conclusion

This legislative analysis has shed light on both the strengths and limitations of existing federal policies in supporting comprehensive career readiness initiatives. While acts like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins), Higher Education Act (HEA), Youth Workforce Readiness Act (YWRA), and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

acknowledge the importance of career exploration, goal setting, skills development, and access to supportive resources, there remains a lack of cohesive and targeted efforts to ensure all individuals receive high-quality career advising and planning services.

The study aimed to address these shortcomings by examining the seven key components of career advising and individualized career plans (CA/ICP) and commonalities and discrepancies across the five acts and suggesting the model policy language for WIOA. By explicitly prioritizing self-exploration, career exploration, long-term goal setting and planning, provision of a wide range of learning opportunities, development of durable technical skills, and access to supportive resources, legislative amendments would foster a more equitable and effective ecosystem of support for career readiness.

Moreover, the findings underscore the need for dedicated funding streams and accountability measures specifically tied to the provision of comprehensive career advising services. Access to certified career counselors, particularly for underserved populations, is critical in empowering individuals to navigate complex career landscapes and make informed decisions about their futures.

Effective career readiness programs and services depend on robust collaboration across education, workforce, and community partners. The interagency agreements and partnerships outlined in the model language facilitate vital data-sharing, coordinated service delivery, and shared commitment to supporting individual future goals.

Ultimately, enhancing federal legislation to prioritize career readiness is an investment in the nation's future workforce and economic prosperity. By equipping all individuals with self-awareness, long-term goals, and skills and enhancing support systems to help individuals pursue fulfilling careers aligned with their aspirations, we can cultivate a thriving society where everyone has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

As policymakers consider reauthorizations and amendments to key acts, they should take full advantage of this opportunity to incorporate the insights and recommendations from this analysis. Doing so would create a comprehensive, cohesive, and equitable national strategy for lifelong career readiness – an imperative for the 21st-century economy and workforce.

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