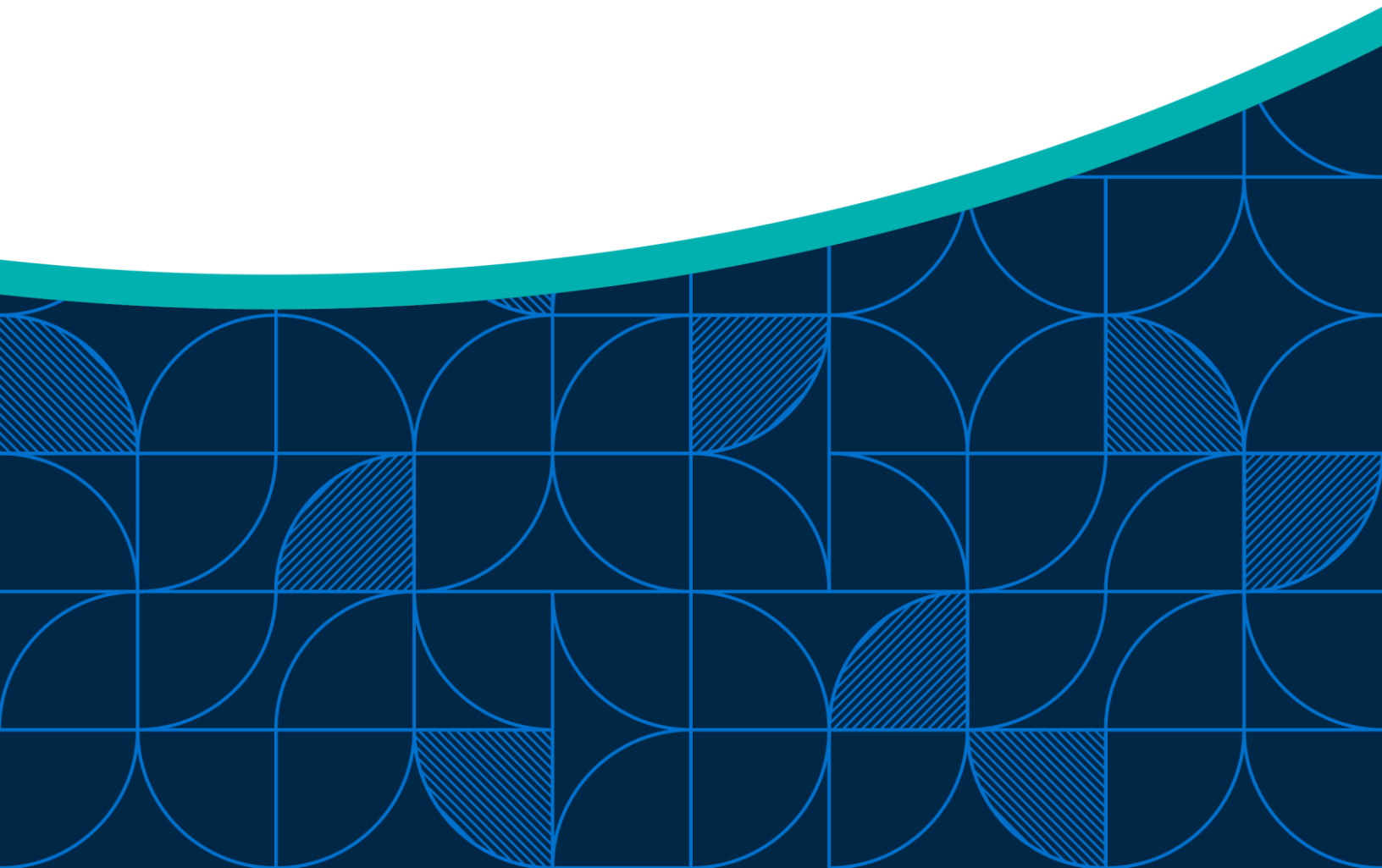




EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Workforce Pell

Why Most Institutions Aren't Ready -- Yet



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The Promise – and Challenges – of Workforce Pell

For more than a decade, higher education associations, workforce advocates, and bipartisan lawmakers have pushed to expand Pell Grant eligibility to high-quality short-term workforce programs. Supporters shared **a simple goal: allow students pursuing rapid pathways into in-demand careers to access the same federal financial aid available to learners enrolled in traditional degree programs**. After years of failed legislative proposals, Workforce Pell finally became law in 2025. But the version Congress enacted is far more restrictive than many advocates envisioned.

Workforce Pell creates a paradox: it expands access to federal aid while making eligibility extraordinarily difficult to achieve. The requirements are so stringent that many institutions will struggle to qualify programs for participation. In one recent survey of leaders responsible for short-term programs, 80% agreed that Workforce Pell will benefit learners, but 42% acknowledged that they are not prepared to meet the policy's requirements, and only 16% expected their institution to bring in meaningful revenue from the program.¹

Because relatively few institutions are positioned to qualify, three possible outcomes appear likely:



Scenario 1: Few programs will qualify, and the policy will be rewritten to enable additional participation.



Scenario 2: Few programs will qualify, and policy-makers will conclude the program is not workable in its current form, discontinuing it.



Scenario 3: Early qualifiers will offer models that help streamline implementation for states and institutions pursuing the dollars later.

The good news is that the investments required to prepare for Workforce Pell are the same investments institutions increasingly need to make regardless of whether they ever receive these dollars. **The real lesson of Workforce Pell is not about Workforce Pell itself. It's about the accountability infrastructure higher education lacks.**

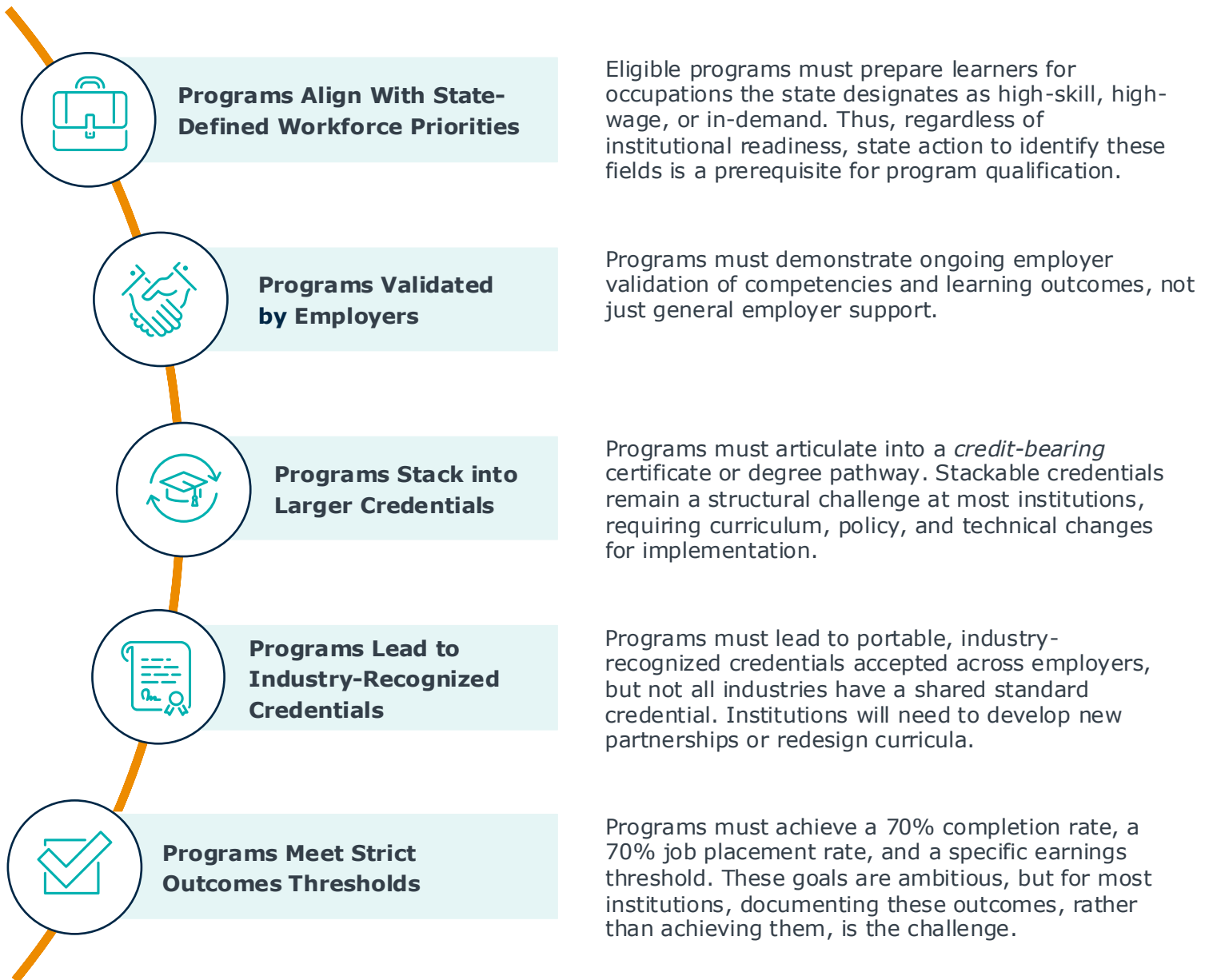
This report includes three components to support your institution's consideration of the opportunity of Workforce Pell:

1. A high-level overview of the program's key requirements and the major barriers to qualifying.
2. A set of no-regrets actions your institution should take now.
3. An accompanying diagnostic tool to share with your team, helping them assess with greater specificity your institutional readiness to qualify programs for these funds.

1. Modern Campus et. al., [State of Continuing Education 2026](#)

Qualifying for Workforce Pell No Easy Matter

Five High Bars Set for Programs to Qualify



Why Most Institutions Aren't Ready

Data Absent or Incomplete

Most institutions have completion data on credit programs, but not for non-credit programs. Few institutions have access to anything but inconsistent self-reported outcomes from grads on job placements and earnings.

Key Operations Siloed

Non-credit and credit operations are siloed across core infrastructure, from student information systems to faculty workload. Qualifying for Workforce Pell will require unifying these structures.

State Infrastructure Lacking

While some states have invested heavily in workforce planning, most are unprepared to identify high-demand jobs or to provide statewide coordination with industry, leaving even institutions with clearly appropriate programs stuck.

What An Institution Ready for Workforce Pell Looks Like

Despite the high bar for eligibility, there are institutions well-prepared to qualify programs for Workforce Pell dollars. They are **characterized by state and internal infrastructure oriented to documenting workforce outcomes along with adequate program scale to make further investments worthwhile.**

Essential Elements of Workforce Infrastructure Outside the Institution

Qualifying for Workforce Pell requires documented program outcomes with data points institutions cannot generate independently. Well-positioned institutions are likely in states:

- with established processes for identifying high-demand jobs
- with robust workforce development structures (active workforce boards; regular regional or state-wide convenings of educational institutions, employers, and non-profits)
- that capture and report on job placement and salary data

Key Readiness Factors Internal to the Institution

Not all institutions in states with robust workforce infrastructure will be prepared to qualify. In addition to state-level infrastructure, well-positioned institutions also:

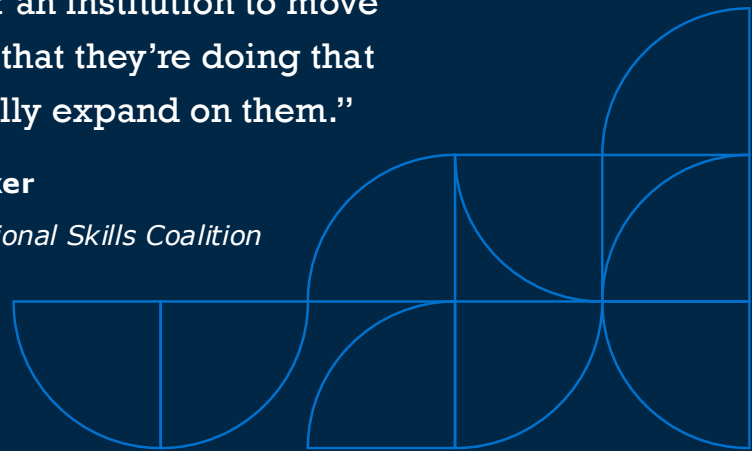
- Already collect student outcomes data (program completion, job placement timeline and role type, and salary) for short-term programs
- Offer short-term programs designed around existing industry-recognized credentialing pathways
- Have a robust short-term program portfolio with significant enrollment, making the compliance effort for Workforce Pell worthwhile



The most predictable way for an institution to move this forward is to take things that they're doing that they know work and hopefully expand on them."

Katie Spiker

Chief of Federal Affairs, National Skills Coalition



Three Investments Worth Making – Even If You Never Receive Workforce Pell

For most institutions, the compliance bar is too high and seeking to qualify programs for Workforce Pell dollars today is not worth the effort. However, there *are* essential investments all institutions should be making now both to prepare for possible future engagement with the program and, more importantly, to **prepare for a wide range of new accountability expectations hitting higher education through state law, federal law, and a changing accreditation landscape.**

Initiate or strengthen coordination with state workforce systems.



- Develop institutional relationships with local workforce boards, economic development organizations, and state agencies responsible for labor market planning.
- Invest leadership time and resources in making the institution a part of local, regional, and state conversations about workforce development.

Implement or expand stackable pathways and Credit for Prior Learning policies.



- Reexamine and revise policies that affect program stackability, including admissions policies and Credit for Prior Learning policies and processes.
- Engage faculty in curriculum mapping exercises and develop short- and long-term program revision plans to enable alignment and stacking.

Build workforce data infrastructure.



- Identify the full range of data needed to comply with emerging accountability measures, particularly those assessing job placement and salary outcomes.
- Develop plans and timeline for sourcing or improving the quality of required data, leveraging internal capacities as well as partnerships with state and federal agencies.

Next Steps

- Use EAB's [Workforce Pell Grant Readiness Self-Diagnostic](#) to determine whether your institution, or specific programs, are positioned to pursue Workforce Pell.
- Current EAB partners should contact their Strategic Leader to **schedule an expert consultation** on Workforce Pell readiness. Institutions exploring these issues can contact EAB to learn more.



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