

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

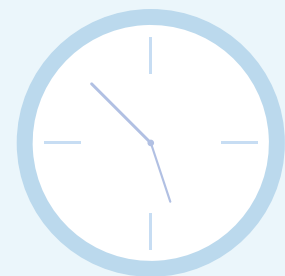
The Urgent Need for an
All-One-System Approach
to Youth Policy

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Fall 2021 marks a potential inflection point in the US approach to youth policy. Congress is considering the Build Back Better Act, which proposes major changes across the spectrum of programs for youth from early childhood through early career.

The enactment of the bill would represent a paradigm shift in the country's approach to youth and young adults. This fundamental change would align with the policy direction that our research suggests is needed to address the challenges facing young people today. To fully support youth on the journey from birth to young adulthood, we need to provide inclusive, culturally responsive, and data-informed support and guidance; smooth out transitions on the pathway traversing education and work; and expand opportunity at every juncture on the way from youth to adulthood. Incorporating programs and services in areas as diverse as early childhood education, child nutrition, teacher preparation, college affordability, and workforce training, the bill is the closest the United States has come to acknowledging that supporting the transition from youth to adulthood requires an all-one-system approach.

In an all-one-system approach, preschools, elementary and secondary schools, community colleges, four-year universities, employers, and governments would all follow an integrated playbook, helping to smooth out young people's progress from pre-K–12 to college and work. An

all-one-system approach is acutely needed and will require comprehensive change to establish a continuum of support along the entire journey to economic independence.

The current proposal for the Build Back Better Act represents a step in this direction. The proposal encompasses funding for a wide range of education and employment services, beginning at birth and extending into young adulthood. They include the following:

- To ensure that **early childhood** sets children up for healthy and successful lives, the bill proposes funding for childcare and universal preschool, along with expanded resources for child nutrition.
- To create equity in **elementary and secondary school education**, the proposal includes funding for school facilities in high-poverty districts, as well as for teacher preparation and diversification of the teaching workforce.
- To improve **postsecondary opportunity**, the bill includes tuition-free community college on a first-dollar basis,¹ funded through federal-state partnerships. It also includes increases to the maximum Pell Grant award, investments in programs that improve transfer pathways from community colleges to public four-year colleges and universities, and grants to improve college completion.
- To shore up the **transition to good jobs**, the proposal includes funding for work-based

learning, career and technical education, registered apprenticeships, community-based programs that help youth acquire work experience, reentry employment programs for young adults who have been involved with the criminal justice system or have dropped out of school, and education–industry partnerships.²

These and other proposed investments in young people's success—along with the paradigm shift in the approach to youth policy more generally—could not be more timely. Even though summer 2021 began with good news for young job seekers as signs of recovery from the pandemic-related shutdowns emerged in the youth labor market, the future of the economic recovery and of young people within it remains uncertain. The pandemic has highlighted young people's vulnerabilities and youth policy's inadequacies in addressing them. As in-person economic activity contracted, young workers were the hardest-hit group, in part because they were concentrated in the retail trade and leisure and hospitality industries.³ More recently, the emergence of the Delta variant of COVID-19 has cast a shadow over the economic recovery, as the pandemic continues to exacerbate a multitude of challenges that have long faced American youth.

The time is right to fundamentally rethink the country's approach to youth policy and introduce an all-one-system approach. The impediments facing young people on the journey from youth to adulthood are not new, but they have reached new heights in a perfect storm of longstanding economic pressures and current pitfalls.

¹ Under a first-dollar approach, free-college grants are used for tuition and fees before other sources of financial aid. Any other financial aid may be used for cost-of-living expenses. Carnevale et al., *The Dollars and Sense of Free College*, 2020.

² Build Back Better Act, H.R. 5376, 2021.

³ Carnevale and Wenzinger, "Tracking the COVID-19 Economic Devastation," 2020; Gould and Kassa, *Young Workers Hit Hard by the COVID-19 Economy*, 2020.

The pressures on young people have been building for a generation.

Young people were already at an economic disadvantage when COVID-19 struck. Before the pandemic, the youth labor market lagged behind where it was at the turn of the 21st century. The recession that followed the burst of the dot-com bubble (2001–02) and the Great Recession (2007–09) had already battered the career prospects of young Americans and caused cumulative long-term economic scarring that prevented many young adults from gaining traction in their careers.⁴ These downturns were especially harmful to millennials, who are now between the ages of 24 and 40.

The recessions that predated COVID-19 had compounded existing duress caused by long-term structural changes to the economy, the collapse of the youth labor market, and public policy failures. Together, these factors heightened the economic and emotional stresses that young adults experienced as they sought to transition to adulthood. Since the

1980s, the economy had increasingly demanded educational attainment beyond high school. At the same time, public support for youth had become grossly inadequate, consisting of piecemeal approaches that focus on solving problems within individual silos.

The pressures on today's youth and the failures of youth policy show how dramatically the world has changed in a single generation. In the era between World War II and the 1980s, young people, primarily young men, could get good jobs in the industrial economy directly out of high school. Back then, the majority of jobs required a high school diploma or less.⁵ Most young workers were able to get career jobs and become financially independent by their mid-20s. But today, the average youth-to-adulthood transition has become much longer and more complex.

Since the 1980s, a new phase has emerged in the youth transition to adulthood—postsecondary

education and early work experience. The share of youth ages 16 to 21 who are employed declined from 59 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 2019.⁶ During the same period, the share of youth ages 16 to 21 enrolled in school or college increased from 57 percent to 71 percent.⁷ It used to be much easier for young adults to get the necessary education and work experience to land a career-track job by their early-to-mid-20s. It now takes many young people until their 30s to get the postsecondary education or training as well as the work experience necessary to latch on to a good job and launch a career. And many youth, especially the least advantaged youth, don't attain a good job at all.

4 For more on scarring effects, see Rothstein, "The Lost Generation?," 2019; Rinz, *Did Timing Matter?*, 2019; Kahn, "The Long-Term Labor Market Consequences of Graduating from College in a Bad Economy," 2010; Mroz and Savage, "The Long-Term Effects of Youth Unemployment," 2006.

5 Carnevale and Rose, *The Economy Goes to College*, 2015; Carnevale and Rose, *The Undereducated American*, 2011.

6 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 1980–2019.

7 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 1980, 2019.

Youth policy has failed to fill the gaps in young people's journeys to adulthood.

If youth policy is meant to assist young people as they run the gauntlet from preschool to good jobs, it has failed miserably. The signs of its failures underscore the need for a paradigm shift.

First of all, access to good jobs begins in preschool, and universal preschool is not yet a reality. The Build Back Better Act proposes to change that. Second, the federal courts have not affirmed the necessity of matching resources to needs in K–12 education. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court hinted that education was an essential individual right.⁸ But it then slammed the door shut on nationwide equality of opportunity in K–12 education by permitting unequal school funding in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* in 1973 and allowing de facto segregation in *Milliken v. Bradley* in 1974.⁹

The seminal report *A Nation at Risk*, issued by the US National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983, represents another failed attempt at reform. It called for academic preparation for every American youth,

emphasizing broad general education for all students and minimizing vocational training in high schools.¹⁰ This change made strides toward reducing race, class, and gender tracking in high schools.¹¹ But almost 40 years later, our K–12 institutions still fail to prepare many students for college and careers. Only 20 percent of recent high school graduates (ages 18 to 25) who are working get good jobs, and those who do are still overwhelmingly (77 percent) male.¹² Only 52 percent of high school sophomores get a certificate, a two-year degree, or a four-year degree within eight years of finishing high school.¹³

The evidence of our failure to help all youth make the long journey from early childhood to adult economic independence is plain. In the trajectory from kindergarten to a good job, the most talented disadvantaged youth do not fare nearly as well as the least talented advantaged youth. It is far better to be born rich and White than smart and poor in America. When we track student test scores beginning in kindergarten, we find that children from families in the top quartile of family socioeconomic status (SES)

who have low test scores have a 71 percent chance of being in the top half of socioeconomic status by their late 20s. However, children from families in the bottom SES quartile but with top test scores have only a 31 percent chance of being in the top half of SES by their late 20s, and the numbers are even worse for talented children from low-income racial and ethnic minority households. Even many youth from less-advantaged backgrounds who demonstrate high achievement all the way through the 10th grade still get lost on the way to a college degree and a good job. Among 10th graders who have *above-median* math scores but are in the *lowest* quartile of family SES, 47 percent are in the top half of SES 10 years later, compared to 56 percent of 10th graders from the *top* quartile of family SES with *below-median* math scores.¹⁴

Many potential remedies for these shortcomings end up lost in the spaces between the institutions on our nation's youth policy organizational charts. Institutional transitions have become a big part of the problem, leading to inadequate educational and workforce outcomes, especially among racial and ethnic minority youth and low-income youth. We can and should do much better.

The news is not all bad. There is growing public support for universal preschool. While the Supreme

Court has failed to fully deliver on the notion of K–12 educational equality promised by *Brown*, a new generation of legal challenges seeks to hold states accountable for ensuring that all students receive an adequate education to prepare them for college and careers.¹⁵ In addition, the boundaries between middle schools, high schools, and postsecondary institutions are eroding as a result of a variety of educational reforms that should be expanded. Our bipartisan federal investments in data transparency have resulted in state longitudinal data systems that follow individual students from kindergarten through early careers and have laid the groundwork for a national data system. Additions of program-level data to the federal government's College Scorecard and the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) initiative represent early efforts to move toward a national system promoting transparency and accountability. These new or newly expanded information systems allow for both transparency and accountability in following individuals' progress at the institutional and program levels from kindergarten to early careers.

The Build Back Better Act proposes sweeping reforms that would cross these policy areas. But its future remains uncertain. Meanwhile, young people remain in a precarious position without an adequate safety net.

8 *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

9 *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1 (1973); *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

10 Gardner et al., *A Nation at Risk*, 1983.

11 Carnevale et al., *Educational Adequacy in the Twenty-First Century*, 2018.

12 We define good jobs as those paying at least \$35,000 for workers younger than 45. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 2019.

13 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) of 2002, 2012.

14 Carnevale et al., *Born to Win, Schooled to Lose*, 2019.

15 Carnevale et al., *Educational Adequacy in the Twenty-First Century*, 2018.

Seven trends affecting education and the economy have combined to put pressure on young people as they transition to economic independence.

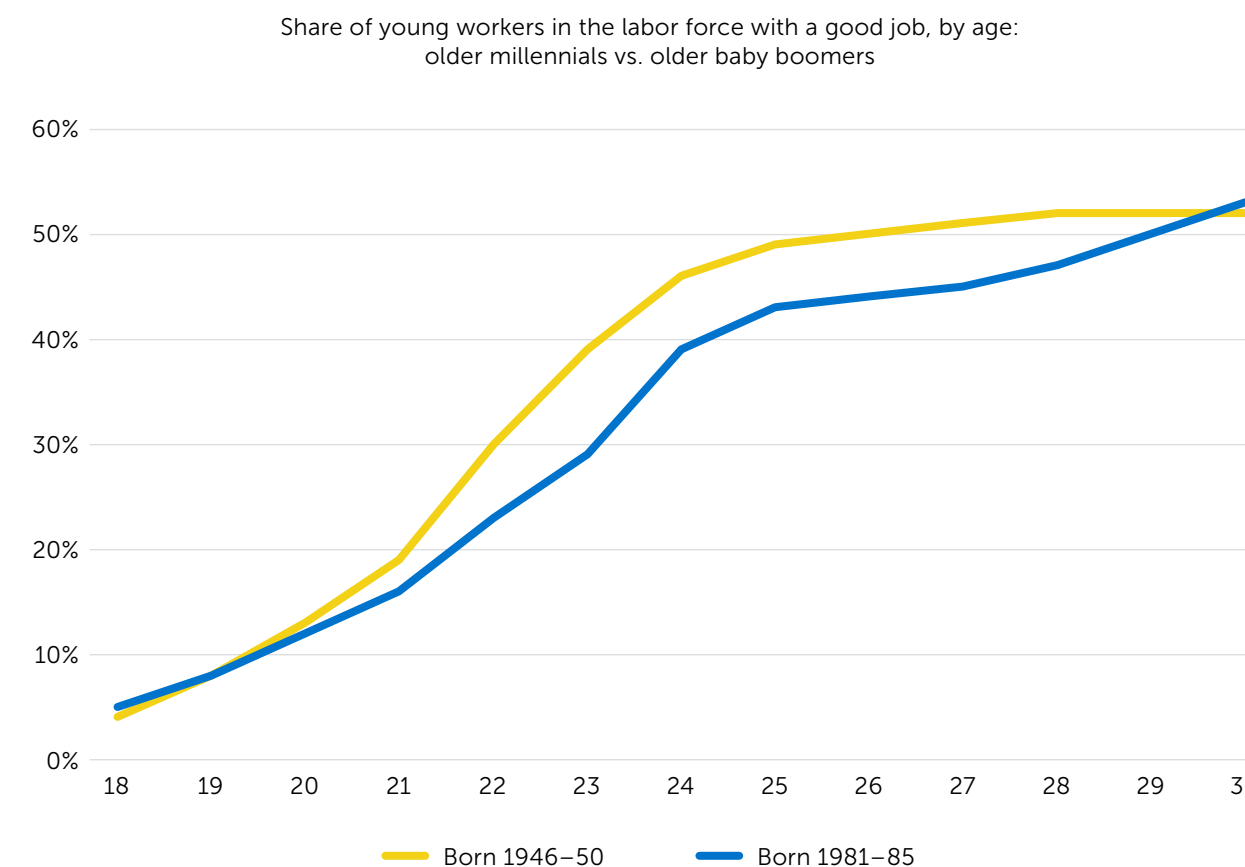
Seven trends affecting education and the economy have combined to make it especially difficult to be a young person in the United States today. Together, these trends have put such substantial pressure on the transitions from youth to adulthood that the need for reform is undeniable. Our nation must completely redesign its fragmented approach to youth transitions. We need a modernized, all-one-system approach that facilitates smooth movement among various segments of the pathways from youth to adulthood.

1 Young people used to cross the threshold from youth dependence to adult independence and arrive at a good job by their mid-20s; now, it takes until their early 30s.

It takes longer today than in the past for young people to latch on to good jobs. That's because young people need more education and training than they once did to get a job that pays middle-class wages. In the decades between World War II and 1980, young people with a high school diploma or less were able to develop general and specific skills through formal and informal on-the-job training. They were able to transition

relatively quickly to good jobs in adulthood without obtaining postsecondary education, often by their mid-20s. In contrast, today's young adults need both postsecondary education in a suitable field of study and high-quality work experience to get a good job on a promising career pathway. It now takes many young workers until their 30s to reach this milestone (Figure 1).¹⁶

FIGURE 1. Young workers are less likely than in the past to have a good job before age 30.



Source: Carnevale et al., *The Elongated Pathway from Youth Dependency to a Good Job*, forthcoming.

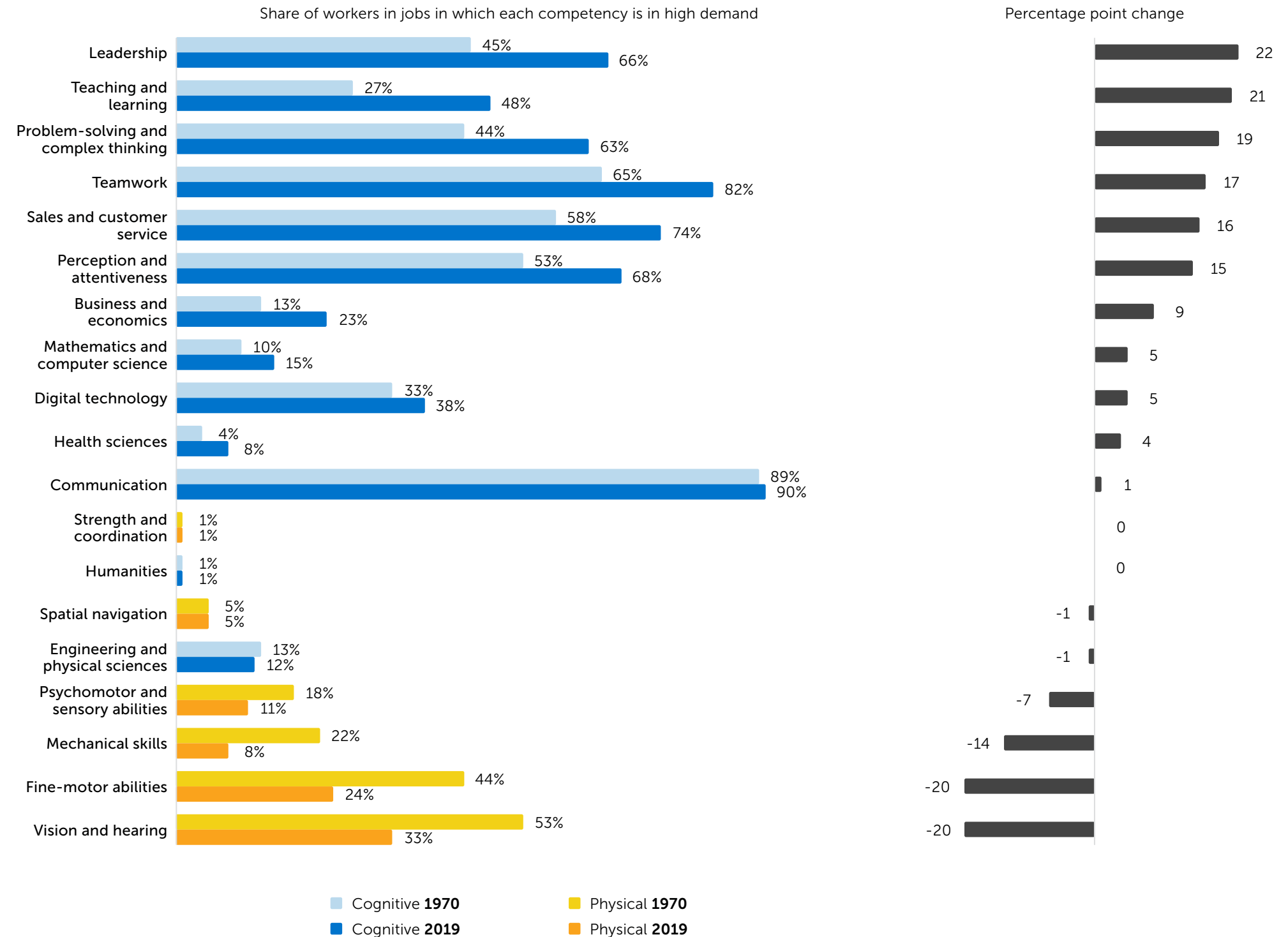
Note: Good jobs pay at least \$35,000 for workers younger than age 45 and at least \$45,000 for workers ages 45 to 64.

¹⁶ Berlin et al., "Introducing the Issue," 2010; Carnevale et al., *Failure to Launch*, 2013; Carnevale et al., *Balancing Work and Learning*, 2018.

2 Structural economic change has increased the demand for cognitive competencies.

Young people’s delayed transitions to good jobs relate to changes in the American economy. When the American manufacturing economy was at its peak in the 1970s, there was an ample supply of good jobs for young people, particularly young men, entering the workforce directly after finishing high school. But then a confluence of powerful forces, including automation and globalization, transformed the American economy through skill-biased technological change.¹⁷ As the physical tasks at the heart of the industrial economy have increasingly been automated or outsourced to other countries, cognitive competencies have become increasingly important for American workers competing in the labor market (Figure 2).¹⁸

FIGURE 2. Structural change has substantially increased the demand for cognitive competencies.



Source: Carnevale et al., *Workplace Basics*, 2020.

Note: A competency is in high demand if the demand value for that competency (the average level and importance) is in the top third of all demand values across occupations and competencies. Differences in shares may not match percentage point changes due to rounding.

17 Carnevale et al., *Upskilling and Downsizing in American Manufacturing*, 2019.

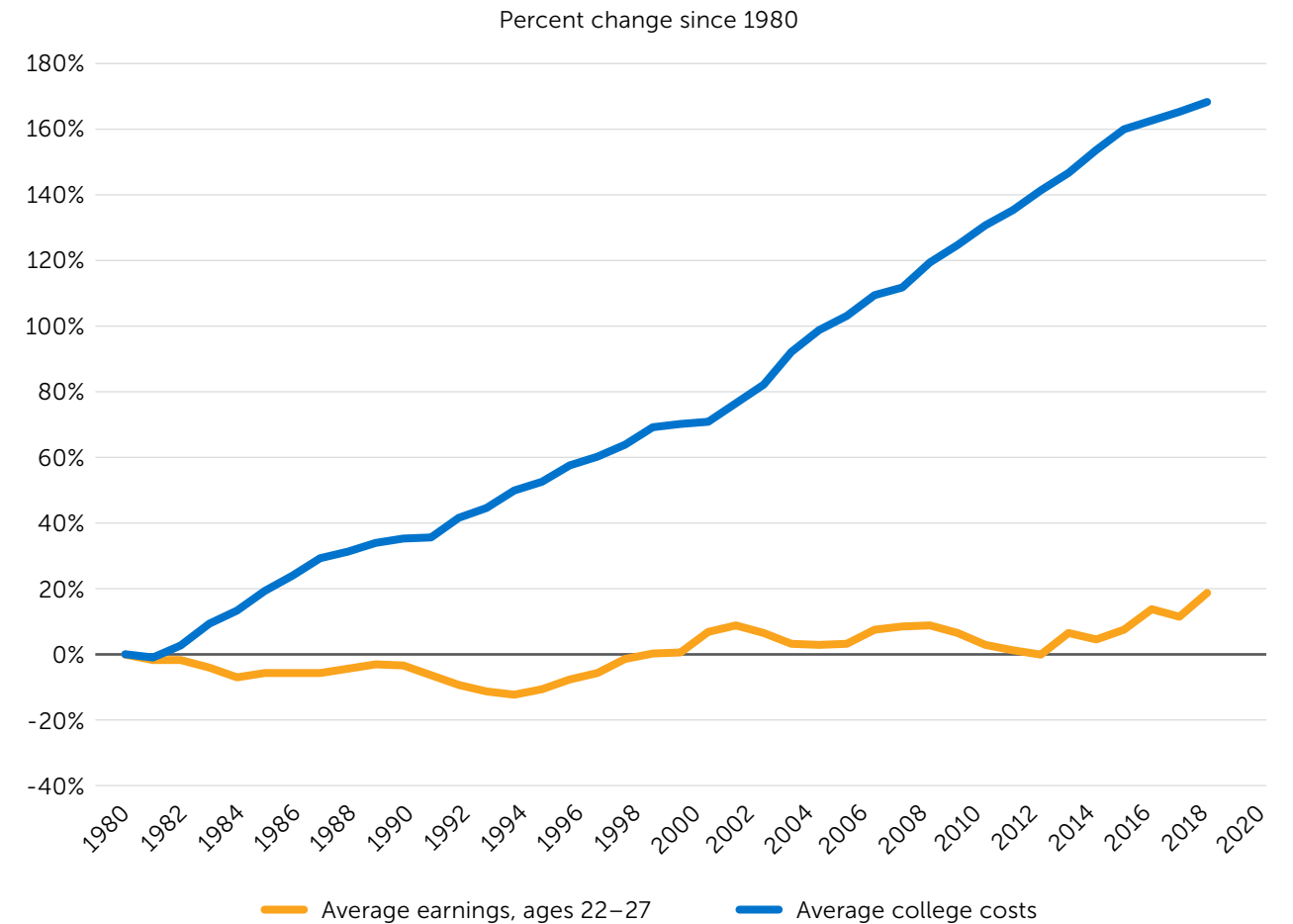
18 Carnevale et al., *Workplace Basics*, 2020.

3 Postsecondary education policy has failed to keep higher education affordable even as formal education beyond high school has become more essential.

The cognitive competencies that are in high demand in the workforce are generally associated with higher levels of education.¹⁹ Today, two out of three jobs require postsecondary education and training, while three out of four jobs in the 1970s required a high school diploma or less.²⁰ Yet while young people today need more education than ever to compete in the labor market, a college education is more expensive than in the past.

The costs of higher education have risen rapidly over the past few decades, making cost a barrier for many young people who wish to pursue a degree or credential (Figure 3). It used to be possible to work one’s way through college; today, college costs are generally too high—and young people’s wages too low—for that to be feasible.²¹ Consequently, more students have to take on larger amounts of debt to get a college degree.²²

FIGURE 3. Since 1980, the costs of college have skyrocketed, while the earnings of young adults have increased much more slowly.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 1980–2019, and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 330.10, 2019.

Note: The college costs used in this analysis include average undergraduate tuition and fees, room, and board at all institutions in constant 2018–19 dollars for academic years 1979–80 through 2018–19. Average earnings are inflation-adjusted to constant 2019 dollars.

19 Carnevale et al., *Workplace Basics*, 2020.

20 Carnevale et al., "All One System," 2019; Carnevale et al., *Recovery*, 2013; Carnevale and Rose, *The Economy Goes to College*, 2015.

21 Carnevale and Smith, *Balancing Work and Learning*, 2018.

22 The share of degree or certificate completers who take out student loans at some point in their studies increased from 52.5 percent in 1999–2000 to 61.8 percent in 2015–16; over the same period, the average cumulative amount borrowed by those who took out loans increased from \$21,330 to \$24,480 in 2018–19 dollars. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 331.95, 2019.

4 The collapse of the youth labor market has made it difficult for young people to attain high-quality work experience.

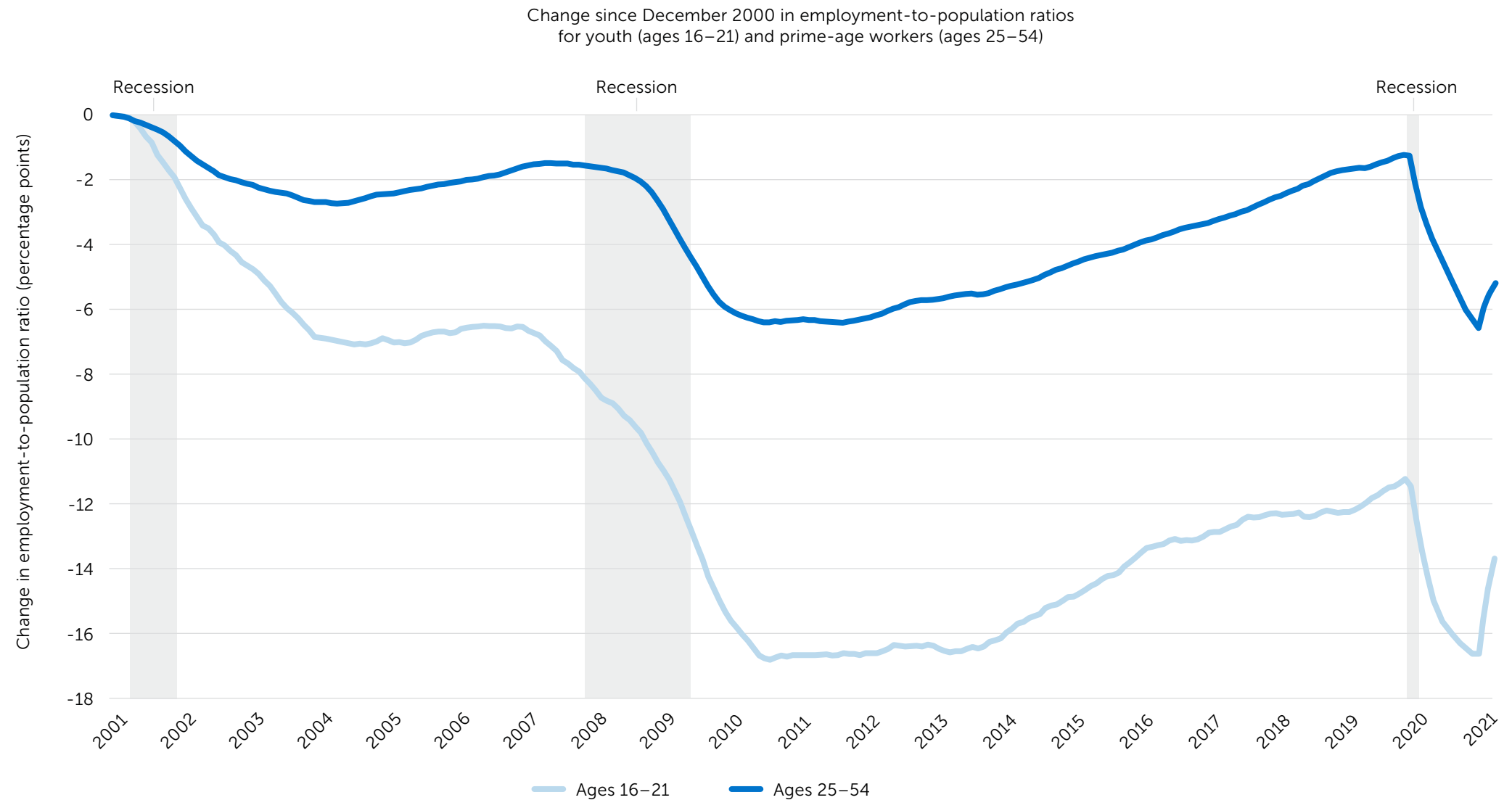
Work experience is crucial for young adults, especially those who cannot access or complete postsecondary education. It is an important way for them to learn new skills and accumulate human capital so they can qualify for decent jobs that pay more than subsistence wages. Yet high-quality work experience is hard to find. In the 1970s, more than half of teenagers were employed; in recent years, that share has been closer to a quarter.²³

Three recessions since the turn of the millennium—the burst of the dot-com bubble, the Great Recession, and the COVID-19 recession—have hit young workers particularly hard. Since 2000, the share of youth who are employed has declined considerably more than the share of prime-age workers who are employed (Figure 4). Even among those who can find jobs, many young people work in occupations such as food and personal services, sales, and administrative support. These occupations provide basic skills but not the higher-level general and technical skills that facilitate movement into good entry-level jobs on promising career pathways.²⁴

23 Morisi, “Teen Labor Force Participation before and after the Great Recession and Beyond,” 2017; Carnevale and Smith, *Balancing Work and Learning*, 2018.

24 Carnevale and Smith, *Balancing Work and Learning*, 2018; Carnevale et al., *Failure to Launch*, 2013.

FIGURE 4. Young people have been hit particularly hard by the last three recessions, with dramatic declines since 2000 in the share of youth who are working.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), Basic Monthly, 2000–20.

Note: The figure shows the change in the employment-to-population ratio since December 2000, using a 12-month trailing moving average.

5 Despite almost 40 years of continuous reforms in the K–12 system, there has been relatively little progress in making high school students college- and career-ready.

The K–12 system has adopted a college-for-all approach since the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Schools have moved away from vocational education, which once provided workforce preparation for students who did not intend to go to college but which often became a dead-end track for low-income, Black, and Latino students. Schools embraced the New Basics curriculum, which ensured that more students would have the core academic background necessary for college enrollment.²⁵ Yet despite the shift toward a college-preparatory curriculum, only

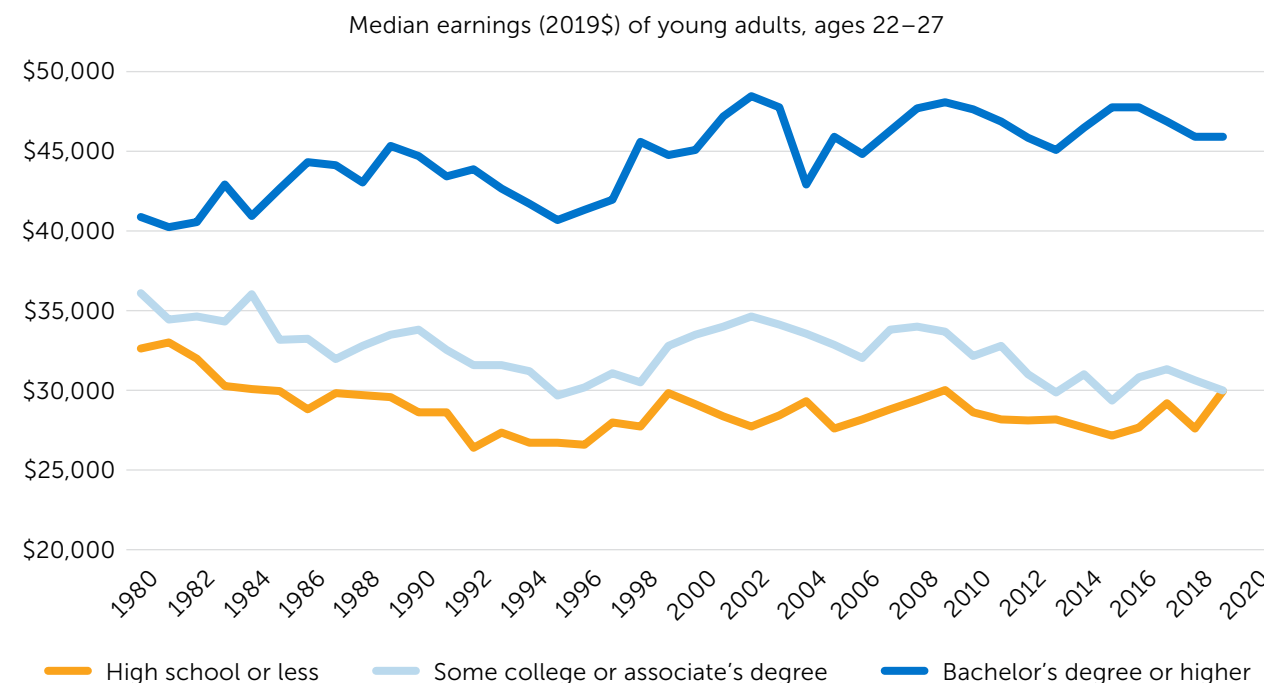
52 percent of high school sophomores attain a postsecondary credential within 10 years.²⁶ While college enrollment rates have increased,²⁷ the burden of workforce preparation has shifted to the postsecondary education system, leaving those who are unable to access or afford college even further behind. The median earnings of young adults with less education than a bachelor’s degree have declined over the past few decades, while the median earnings of young adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher have grown (Figure 5).

25 Gardner et al., *A Nation at Risk*, 1983.

26 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) of 2002, 2012.

27 The college enrollment rate for young people ages 18 to 24 increased from 25.7 percent in 1980 to 40.9 percent in 2018; US Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 302.60, 2018.

FIGURE 5. The median earnings of young adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher have been growing, while those of young adults with less education have been declining.



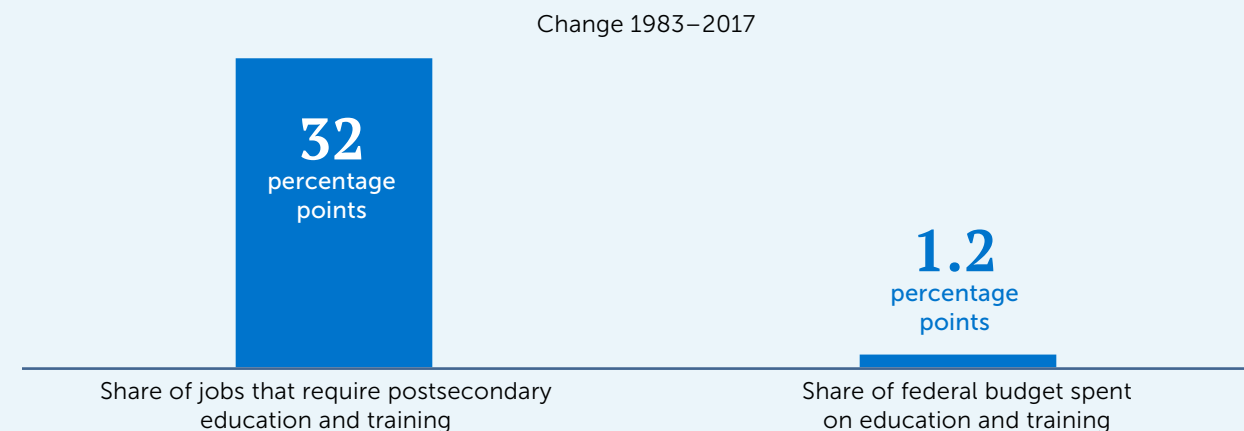
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement, 1980–2019.

6 Both youth labor policy and education policy have been hampered by fragmentation, and federal investment has not kept up with the growing need for services.

Different aspects of young people’s experiences are governed by different policy authorities and supported by different funding streams. The result is a fragmented approach to labor and education defined by multiple silos of policy and practice. Within education, pre-K–12 policy is governed separately from higher education policy, and labor policy operates in its own arena. Each institutional silo is subdivided into multiple silos of its own. The

resulting patchwork quilt of policy and practice leaves big gaps between silos and is woefully inadequate to support young people as they navigate the many possible pathways across and within the education and training system and the workforce. In addition, public funding for education and job training has not kept up with the growing need for these services to support youth transitions to economic independence (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. Federal spending on education and training has not kept up with the growing demand for these services.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS); US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS); US Bureau of Labor Statistics; and Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Historical Tables, Table 9.9, 1983, 2017.

7 The current education-to-workforce pipeline is fraught with class and racial inequalities.

Disparities by socioeconomic status (SES) are already evident in kindergarten and persist throughout the educational pipeline and into the workforce. Among students who are in the bottom quartile by family SES in 10th grade, 40 percent remain in the bottom quartile as young adults, and 70 percent remain in the bottom two quartiles. In fact, a child’s chances of having above-median SES by age 25 depend more on family SES than on the child’s demonstrated ability. A kindergartner with top test scores and a family in the lowest SES quartile has only a 31 percent chance of being in the top half of SES at age 25, compared to a 71 percent chance for a kindergartner with bottom test scores and a family in the highest SES quartile (Figure 7).²⁸

In addition, Black and Latino children are more likely than White children to come from households in the lowest SES quartile, and they face barriers related to discrimination and racism. Among 10th graders with below-median family SES, 70 percent of Black students and 66 percent of Latino students remain at below-median SES as young adults, compared to 59 percent of White students.²⁹ Black and Latino youth also have persistently higher unemployment rates than White youth and are more likely to be disconnected, neither employed nor enrolled in school or college.³⁰ These disparities in the education and training pipeline have a major impact on inequities in the workforce, where 41 percent of Black workers and 37 percent of Latino workers hold a good job, compared to 58 percent of White workers.³¹

FIGURE 7. Children with low test scores from affluent families are more likely than children with high test scores from poor families to attain above-median socioeconomic status (SES) as young adults.



Source: Carnevale et al., *Born to Win, Schooled to Lose*, 2019.

28 Carnevale et al., *Born to Win, Schooled to Lose*, 2019.

29 Carnevale et al., *Born to Win, Schooled to Lose*, 2019.

30 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), 2000–19.

31 Carnevale et al., *The Unequal Race for Good Jobs*, 2019.

Creating an all-one-system approach that protects young people from modern pressures will require comprehensive reform.

Taken together, these seven trends point to one clear conclusion—the approach to youth transitions between different phases of education and workforce systems needs to be entirely revamped. While the existing piecemeal approach sometimes succeeds in delivering customized services to specific populations of youth and young adults, it also results in substantial fragmentation, with different institutions and programs focused on different aspects and segments of the transition to adulthood.

Youth policy reform will require us to replace this disjointed system with a holistic approach. We need a modernized, all-one-system framework that streamlines young people’s journeys from education to work. This system must involve data-informed, personalized educational and career counseling delivered by caring professionals at all points along the youth-to-adulthood journey. And it must involve shared goals, shared responsibility, and shared funding among all stakeholders along the way.

The economic pressures on youth since the turn of the 21st century coupled with the historic failures of youth policy demand a new all-one-system approach. As part of this seamless approach, we envision a national student record system, anchored by continuous academic and career counseling and improved transfer policy. This approach would ensure that the ramps between various parts of the education and workforce systems are simpler to navigate and that students and workers have the information they need to reach their personal and economic goals.

Creating this all-one-system approach will require us to rethink the policies and programs that affect young people from birth, through the education system, and into the workforce. The enactment of the Build Back Better Act would be a step in the right direction toward comprehensive, system-wide reform. Ultimately, however, we need to go further. We need both vertical integration, connecting

each segment of the journey to the next, and horizontal integration, in the form of wraparound support services at every step of the way:

1 We need to invest in education and plant the seeds for labor-market success, beginning at birth.

Early childhood education sets the developmental stage for everything that comes after it. Kindergarten is too late to intervene and ensure that all children have a chance to reach their full potential. We need to provide high-quality, equitably funded, universal pre-kindergarten to interrupt patterns of inequality as early as possible. The recently

enacted American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 made progress toward addressing this need with funding for Head Start and childcare, but larger investments are needed.³² The Build Back Better Act acknowledges this continued need by seeking to establish high-quality universal preschool, along with a new childcare and early-learning entitlement program that would provide services to children from birth through age five.³³

In conjunction with reforms to early educational funding and policy, we also need to ensure that families have the resources to support their young children, including affordable and accessible childcare, adequate family and medical leave, and family-sustaining wages. Adequate support for children and families beginning at birth sets children up for success as they move through the K–12 system and toward postsecondary education or the workforce. The child tax credit included in the American Rescue Plan Act—which earmarked \$3,000 for children ages 6 to 17 and \$3,600 for children under the age of 6 for families with incomes under \$150,000³⁴—was a first step toward providing families with the support they need. Additional action will be necessary to make these programs permanent, however. Comprehensive paid family and medical leave would also enhance the financial stability of families with children.³⁵

32 The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 allocated \$1 billion to Head Start and nearly \$15 billion to Child Care and Development Block Grants for states to provide childcare assistance to essential workers.

33 House Committee on Education and Labor, “Build Back Better Act: Education and Labor Committee Print,” 2021; Build Back Better Act, H.R. 5376, 2021.

34 American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, 2021.

35 The Build Back Better Act seeks to extend the Child Tax Credit through 2025 and make it into a monthly allowance. It also seeks to enact a national comprehensive paid family and medical leave program. House Committee on Education and Labor, “Build Back Better Act: Education and Labor Committee Print,” 2021; Build Back Better Act, H.R. 5376, 2021.

2 We need to imbue inclusive and culturally responsive approaches across our education and workforce systems to improve the experiences of youth from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Approaches like the positive youth development model recognize the importance of the psychosocial and cultural elements of identity formation and emphasize the potential for positive outcomes. By engaging with their communities and peer groups beginning in adolescence and continuing through early adulthood and beyond, young people can acquire the personal and professional competencies that will help them succeed as adults.³⁶

For youth from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds, exposure to role models with whom they share social identities in educational and professional settings is critical to positive self-development and identity formation. To strengthen opportunities for all young people to build such relationships, we need to ensure that the teaching, training, and counseling workforces better reflect the student body. We need to provide professionals in these fields with training in culturally responsive teaching³⁷ and counseling. We also need to promote engagement with communities that can connect young people with role models and a sense of purpose in their pursuits.

Reforms in these areas would represent key investments in strong relationships between students and caring professionals. Current

policy proposals recognize the importance of such investments. The Build Back Better Act seeks to strengthen the support network for students through “Grow Your Own Programs” grants, which would aim to address shortages of teachers and administrators in high-need schools and subjects and to increase diversity in these professions.³⁸

3 From kindergarten through college, we need to recognize and build on the complementarity among classroom learning, occupational exploration, and work-based learning.

Beginning in elementary school and continuing through middle school, students should have ample opportunities to explore a wide range of occupations through field trips, career days, and other educational activities. In high school and college, students should be exposed to various forms of work-based learning, including internships, work-study programs, apprenticeships, and cooperative education. Paying young people for their participation in internships and other intensive work-based learning opportunities helps ensure that low-income students can participate in valuable professional development opportunities.³⁹ The Department of Education should encourage the use of Federal Work-Study funds to pay low-income students who participate in internships related to academic programs that would otherwise be unpaid under the Department of Labor’s guidance.⁴⁰

K–12 school systems in all states should take seriously the responsibility of ensuring that all students are college- and career-ready. State courts should hold policymakers and school system administrators accountable for providing adequate funding to all schools, including those in low-income neighborhoods with large shares of students from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. State Longitudinal Data Systems make it possible to clearly establish whether states are living up to the commitment to equitable educational opportunity that is articulated in many state constitutions and statutes.

In the postsecondary system, work-based learning programs should parallel fields of study. In addition, both high schools and postsecondary institutions should offer credit-bearing career-preparation courses that allow individual students to formulate their own data-informed plans for their education and career pathways.

The Build Back Better Act plans to expand work-based learning by increasing funding for registered apprenticeships, youth apprenticeships, Job Corps, YouthBuild, AmeriCorps, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth Activities programs. It also proposes additional grants for partnerships among community colleges and industry leaders, as well as partnerships among employers, state or local workforce boards, unions or labor organizations, and education and training providers. These partnerships would help prepare individuals for high-skill, high-wage, in-demand jobs.⁴¹

4 We need to continue to break down the artificial barriers between secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, and labor markets.

Practices like dual enrollment—including early-college high school and dual-credit programs—let young people start their postsecondary education before they even leave high school. These programs have been found to enhance college access, enrollment, and completion, as well as academic achievement in high school.⁴² Recognizing the effectiveness of models that connect high school and college, some policymakers have proposed allowing Pell Grants to be used for dual enrollment programs. They have also proposed investing in partnerships among high schools, community colleges, and employers that would allow high school students to graduate with an industry-recognized credential that offers access to a good job and opportunities to pursue continued education and training.⁴³

To discourage tracking in postsecondary institutions, we also need to build bridges that better connect public community colleges and public four-year institutions. The Build Back Better Act calls for states to develop and implement transfer pathway plans that include the following: assurance that students who earn associate’s degrees from community colleges will receive full credit for the first two years of related bachelor’s degree programs at public four-year colleges and universities, improved transferability of individual courses taken at community colleges, expanded policies

36 Fernandes-Alcantara, *Vulnerable Youth*, 2018; Arnold, “Supporting Adolescent Exploration and Commitment,” 2017.

37 Muñiz, “Culturally Responsive Teaching,” 2019.

38 Build Back Better Act, H.R. 5376, 2021.

39 This is especially important because low-income students are more likely than high-income students to work in jobs unrelated to their fields of study. Carnevale and Smith, *Balancing Work and Learning*, 2018.

40 US Department of Labor, “Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs Under the Fair Labor Standards Act,” 2018.

41 House Committee on Education and Labor, “*Build Back Better Act*: Education and Labor Committee Print,” 2021; Build Back Better Act, H.R. 5376, 2021.

42 US Department of Education, *Dual Enrollment Programs*, 2017.

43 The Biden-Harris Campaign endorsed such partnerships and supported the use of Pell Grants for dual enrollment programs in 2020. In addition, it proposed a new competitive grant program for low-income communities and communities of color to incentivize reinvention of the high school experience to meet the demands of the modern economy. Biden-Harris Campaign, “The Biden Plan for Educators, Students, and Our Future,” 2020.

supporting reverse transfer,⁴⁴ and access to comprehensive counseling and support to facilitate transfer from two-year to four-year colleges and universities.

These changes would be a good start, but policymakers should go further. To encourage transfer, all public four-year colleges should enroll at least 20 percent of their junior-year cohort as transfers from community colleges. In addition, community colleges should be allowed to grant bachelor's degrees, especially in fields tied to local and regional labor markets, as is already done in 24 states.⁴⁵

Finally, we need to strengthen the connections between education and training. While short-term training cannot substitute for comprehensive educational programs that have a rich mix of general and specific education, it can nonetheless boost the employment prospects of adults seeking an educational program requiring smaller investments of time and money. The federal government should provide funding for short-term training to low-income young adults, similar to Pell Grants provided for educational programs, as long as the covered programs follow clear standards of transparency and accountability that include completion and earning metrics. These short-term training programs should also create pathways to additional education for those who wish to pursue it.

5 We need free college to help low-income students access postsecondary education.

College affordability is another barrier for students transitioning to postsecondary education. The average price tag for undergraduate education, including tuition, fees, room, and board, has increased by 169 percent since 1980.⁴⁶ A free-college program would send students and parents a clear message that they don't have to worry about affordability.⁴⁷ The Build Back Better Act would establish a tuition-free, first-dollar community college program funded through a state-federal partnership.⁴⁸

If it passes, free community college will mark a major milestone in efforts to make college more accessible. However, it will deepen the imperative to confront the race, class, and gender tracking that continues in our postsecondary education system.⁴⁹

While neither free community college nor a broader plan for free college will independently change the separate and unequal dynamics of American higher education, offering a tuition-free option only to those at community colleges will accentuate existing educational inequalities. Low-income students and students from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds often attend poorly resourced K–12 schools due to residential segregation. At the postsecondary

level, they are concentrated in two-year colleges, while affluent White students are concentrated in selective four-year colleges and universities.⁵⁰ A free community college program may further solidify this pattern unless it is combined with strong wraparound support services, robust transfer pathways, and additional supports to aid bachelor's degree attainment for traditionally underrepresented students.

6 We need to create a career counseling system that provides the information and mentorship that students need to plan and pursue their educational and career goals.

In a society like ours—in which race, class, and gender profoundly influence young people's pathways to adulthood—we need counseling, mentoring, and work-based learning that expand young people's horizons beyond their previous experiences and their personal networks beyond their existing social connections.

Positive developmental relationships between young people and adult role models who can connect them to opportunities and mentorship are a key ingredient in successful youth programs.⁵¹ We need to make sure that all youth programs foster these relationships with culturally responsive program staff and community members who reflect and understand young people's social identities and experiences.

The missing link in the education-to-work transition is career counseling provided by

professionally certified career counselors. It should begin in middle school and be accompanied by comprehensive student services. Such counseling should be provided by professionals whose duty is to serve the best interests of the students rather than the institutions where they work, similar to the professional responsibility that doctors owe their patients rather than the hospitals at which they practice. These counselors will need the expertise to provide reliable information and the interpersonal skills to gain the trust of the young people they advise. They will also need the training necessary to interrupt systemic racial biases as they help students make informed choices about their futures.

Community schools offer one promising model for comprehensive support services. These schools bring together students, families, teachers, and community organizations to identify families' unmet needs and provide wraparound services to address them.⁵²

7 We need transparency, accountability, and coordination in evaluating, regulating, and administering postsecondary education and workforce training programs.

All publicly funded postsecondary education and training programs should be transparent about completion rates and the earnings of program completers. Years of investments in State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) have resulted in significant infrastructure at the state level to

44 Reverse transfer involves applying credits earned at four-year institutions toward degrees and certificates from two-year institutions.

45 Meza, "Overcoming the 'Opportunity Mirage' with Community College Baccalaureate Degrees," 2021.

46 The college costs used in this analysis include average undergraduate tuition and fees, room, and board in constant 2018–19 dollars for academic years 1979–80 through 2018–19; Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the US Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 330.10, 2019.

47 For more on the costs and benefits of free-college programs, see Carnevale et al., *The Dollars and Sense of Free College*, 2020.

48 Build Back Better Act, H.R. 5376, 2021.

49 Carnevale and Strohl, *Separate and Unequal*, 2013; Carnevale et al., *Our Separate and Unequal Public Colleges*, 2018; Carnevale et al., *The Merit Myth*, 2020.

50 Carnevale and Strohl, *Separate and Unequal*, 2013; Carnevale et al., *Our Separate and Unequal Public Colleges*, 2018; Carnevale et al., *The Merit Myth*, 2020.

51 Ross et al., *Work-Based Learning Can Advance Equity and Opportunity for America's Young People*, 2020.

52 President Biden's budget for FY 2022 includes \$443 million for full-service community schools; Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the U.S. Government*, 2021. During his 2020 campaign, President Biden proposed expanding community schools to enable them to serve an additional 300,000 students; Biden-Harris Campaign, "The Biden Plan for Educators, Students, and Our Future," 2020.

support such transparency and accountability. In addition, the US Department of Education's College Scorecard continues to expand the data that are publicly available.

Information alone is not sufficient to regulate the marketplace, however. Gainful employment regulations should apply to programs that are narrowly designed to prepare students for work in a specific occupation or field. Information about program outcomes also should be used when advising students and coordinating initiatives involving K–12 schools, employers, and higher education stakeholders. This will help ensure that the data are translated into continuous improvements that enhance students' chances for success.

We should unify federal workforce education and training policy by coordinating and combining efforts led by the US Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and those led by the US Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education.

8 To the extent possible, we need to involve employers in developing and providing work-based education.

Successfully connecting education to the workforce requires collaboration with the people who best understand the demands of the labor market—employers. Unlike the European apprenticeship systems that are administered jointly by governments, educators, unions, and employers, the American education system has had limited direct involvement from employers.⁵³

At the same time, employer involvement is extremely valuable today for helping young adults apply their learning from school and college to the workplace as they develop additional occupational skills. Stakeholders generally acknowledge the need for employer involvement, but there is never enough of it to go around, and employers can be fickle in their commitments to training the future workforce.

Nonetheless, models like the **National Academy Foundation, the Pathways to Prosperity Network, P-Tech, the Urban Alliance, Genesys Works, and Per Scholas** suggest that there is room for growth in the amount of employer involvement in education in the United States.



With these changes, we can start building a comprehensive system that will ensure broad access to smooth pathways from youth to adulthood. The time is right to build the new modern networks necessary to prepare the next generation for success in the 21st century.

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⁵³ While the United States does not have an extensive European-style apprenticeship system, policymakers have recently shown increased interest in expanding the American Registered Apprenticeship Program. For example, in the American Jobs Plan, the Biden-Harris administration calls for creating 1 to 2 million new registered apprenticeships and improving the apprenticeship pipeline to offer more access to women and members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. White House, "Fact Sheet: The American Jobs Plan," 2021.

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