

# Workforce Ecosystem Collaborative Convening:

Advancing a Unified Workforce Development Ecosystem  
through Collaboration, Innovation, and Equity

March 30, 2025 – Dallas, Texas



## **I. Executive Summary**

The Workforce Ecosystem Collaborative convened two landmark meetings—in December 2024 in San Antonio at ACTE’s CareerTech VISION and in March 2025 in Dallas at COABE 2025—to advance a national dialogue on integrated workforce development strategies. This white paper summarizes key insights, emergent themes, and actionable opportunities that arose from these convenings. Leaders representing adult education, workforce development, correctional education, employer engagement, and national advocacy organizations gathered to identify systemic strengths (“roses”), persistent challenges (“thorns”), and emerging innovations (“buds”). Together, they charted a path toward a more connected, equitable, and future-ready workforce development and adult education ecosystem.

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## **II. Introduction and Purpose**

The Collaborative was founded on the belief that a robust, inclusive workforce system depends on the coordination of education, correctional education, workforce engagement, economic development, and employer partnerships. The March 2025 convening, held at the COABE National Conference, built upon the December 2024 meeting by focusing on emerging “buds”—opportunities to address inequities, modernize systems, and scale impactful practices. Participants reviewed and ranked 13 innovation areas, discussed implementation strategies, and explored collective influence to drive change in the workforce ecosystem.

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### III. Roses: Strengths in the Workforce Ecosystem

The workforce development ecosystem is experiencing significant momentum. Highlights include:

- **Record Enrollment** in adult education and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, with successful transitions into postsecondary and employment.
- **Inclusive Credentialing** with increased acceptance of micro-credentials, stackable certificates, and alternative pathways.
- **Employer Engagement** with growing recognition of skills-based / competency-based hiring and support for reentry programs.
- **Work-Based Learning** such as apprenticeships, internships, and Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs aligning directly with job market needs.
- **Reentry and Correctional Education** models demonstrating promise for justice-involved individuals.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration** across education, corrections, workforce boards, and industry to strengthen the ecosystem.
- **Shifting Mindsets** around degrees, skills, and inclusive hiring practices.

These positive trends point to a paradigm shift in how education and employment readiness are defined and how services are delivered.

## IV. Thorns: Systemic Challenges Impeding Progress

Despite progress, several barriers persist:

- **Siloed Systems** between education, workforce, and social services reduce effectiveness and often result in duplicative efforts.
- **Inconsistent Funding** at federal and state levels limits innovation and sustainability.
- **Credential Confusion** around the value and portability of certifications and diplomas creates uncertainty for employers and learners, particularly when related to the portability/mobility of credential recipients.
- **Digital Divide and Infrastructure Gaps** hinder equitable access, especially in rural areas.
- **Employer Mismatch** between real-time job needs and program outputs persists.
- **Limited Reentry Support** for formerly incarcerated individuals in transitioning to meaningful employment.
- **Data System Failures** prevent comprehensive outcome tracking and program accountability.
- **Instructor Shortages** and outdated qualification requirements delay workforce responses.
- **Equity Gaps** remain for learners with disabilities, English language learners, and marginalized populations.

To unlock the ecosystem's potential, stakeholders must address these issues through systemic reform, equitable investment, and stronger collaboration.

## V. Buds: Emerging Innovations and Opportunities

At the March 2025 convening, participants addressed the “buds” identified at the December 2024 convening. Participants ranked the following “buds” as top-ranked priorities for ecosystem growth:

### Top-Ranked Buds (Importance Score = 5)

- **Cross-Sector Integration:** Breaking down silos for seamless service delivery.
- **Enhanced Employer Engagement:** Especially for justice-involved individuals and in co-designing training.
- **Equity-Driven Reforms:** Serving marginalized communities through intentional design.
- **Skills-Based Hiring:** Promoting employment based on demonstrated ability, not credentials alone.
- **Reentry and Correctional Education Pathways:** Bridging corrections education with CTE and employment.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Communicating the value of adult education and credentials to employers and policymakers.

#### **Cross-Sector Integration:**

Cross-sector integration refers to the intentional alignment and collaboration between education, workforce, and social service systems to create a more cohesive and efficient ecosystem. By breaking down silos that traditionally separate these sectors, organizations can reduce redundancies, share data more effectively, and ensure that services are designed

around the needs of the whole individual. This approach allows learners and workers to seamlessly access the support they need—whether that’s skills training, transportation, childcare, or job placement—through coordinated service delivery. Effective integration fosters a more personalized and supportive experience for participants and improves overall program outcomes.

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### **Enhanced Employer Engagement:**

Deeper engagement with employers is critical to building a workforce and adult education system that responds to real-world needs. This includes involving employers early in the design of training programs and ensuring they play an active and continuous role in mentoring, hiring, and evaluating candidates. For justice-involved individuals in particular, employer partnerships can break down stigma and create meaningful pathways to reintegration through apprenticeships, internships, and direct employment opportunities. By working alongside employers to understand skill gaps, co-create training, and promote inclusive hiring, the workforce ecosystem can better connect education and training to employment and ensure that all individuals—including those with barriers—have equitable access to opportunity.

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### **Equity-Driven Reforms:**

Equity-driven reforms are essential to ensure that marginalized and underrepresented populations are not left behind in the evolving workforce landscape. These reforms involve

designing programs that intentionally address barriers faced by groups such as people of color, justice-involved individuals, people with disabilities, and those living in poverty. This means adapting curriculum delivery, increasing access to wraparound services, building culturally relevant pathways, infusing digital literacy into all programs, and amplifying community voices in policy and planning processes. True equity in the workforce ecosystem requires more than inclusion—it demands transformation that centers justice, flexibility, and the lived experiences of underserved populations.

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### **Skills-Based Hiring:**

Skills-based hiring is a powerful shift away from traditional credential-based recruitment practices, focusing instead on demonstrated competencies, industry-specific knowledge and skills, and relevant experience. This model values what an individual can do, rather than where they went to school or the degrees they hold. It opens doors for those who may have gained skills through informal learning, military service, or hands-on experience, and it supports nontraditional learners who have completed short-term training or earned industry recognized certifications. Promoting skills-based hiring allows employers to access a broader, more diverse talent pool while creating equitable hiring practices that align workforce development programs with labor market demands.

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**Reentry and Correctional Education Pathways:**

Creating robust education, training, and career pathways for justice-involved individuals is vital for reducing recidivism and ensuring long-term reintegration success. Reentry and correctional education programs that connect to community college CTE offerings and employment pipelines can offer life-changing opportunities. These pathways must be intentional, well-resourced (including wrap-around services), and supported by employers willing to hire individuals with records. Effective reentry programs blend adult basic education, vocational training, and soft skill development with supportive services like expungement assistance and case management—an ad hoc Integrated Education and Training (IET) model. Building continuity between correctional institutions and community-based programs creates a true second-chance system for justice-involved learners transitioning back into society.

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**Awareness Campaigns:**

Awareness campaigns play a crucial role in changing perceptions and building public support for adult education, workforce programs, and nontraditional credentials. These campaigns help employers understand the value of hiring individuals trained through adult education and recognize the legitimacy of certifications, micro-credentials, and IET programs. They also inform policymakers and community stakeholders about the return on investment and societal benefits of a robust workforce and adult education system. Sharing success stories, data, and demographic impact helps build momentum for funding, policy change, and employer buy-in.



Effective campaigns humanize the impact of workforce development and help shift the national narrative toward inclusive economic mobility.

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At the March 2025 convening, participants ranked the following “buds” as being of high-potential priorities for ecosystem growth:

### **High-Potential Buds**

- **Expansion of IET Programs (4.5):** Embedding employers early in program design and delivery.
- **Innovative Funding Models (4):** Leveraging public-private partnerships and ROI-focused advocacy.
- **Workforce Pipelines (4):** Developing educator and practitioner talent through apprenticeships and entrepreneurship.
- **Short-Term Training Innovations (4):** Flexible and adaptable training for high-demand sectors.
- **Leadership Development (3.5):** Building a new generation of ecosystem leaders with cross-training strategies.

### **Expansion of IET Programs (4.5):**

Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs are becoming a cornerstone of effective workforce development, blending academic instruction with workforce preparation and occupational skills training. To fully realize the potential of IET, it is essential to embed

employers at the earliest stages of program design and delivery. This ensures that the curriculum is aligned with real-world industry needs and that participants are being equipped with the exact skills required for in-demand roles. When employers help shape program goals, provide input on training content, and offer work-based learning experiences, the result is a more responsive and outcomes-oriented model that improves both employment rates, wage growth, and workforce retention.

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#### **Innovative Funding Models (4):**

Sustainable and scalable workforce development and adult education requires innovative funding models that go beyond traditional government appropriations. Public-private partnerships, performance-based funding, and employer co-investment models can unlock new revenue streams and incentivize results-driven approaches. These models not only help scale successful programs but also increase accountability by linking funding to measurable outcomes such as job placement, credential attainment, and long-term wage growth. ROI-focused advocacy is crucial to engaging policymakers and business leaders, demonstrating that investment in adult education and workforce training delivers economic returns and strengthens community resilience.

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#### **Workforce Pipelines (4):**

A critical aspect of building a resilient workforce ecosystem is the intentional development of

educator and practitioner pipelines. This involves creating structured pathways for individuals to enter and grow within the field of adult education and workforce development.

Apprenticeship models, mentorship programs, and professional development opportunities can help attract new talent while also upskilling existing professionals. Entrepreneurship training is also a valuable component, empowering practitioners to lead innovative initiatives and respond to emerging labor market needs. Strengthening the pipeline ensures that the ecosystem has the leadership, instructional capacity, and adaptability to meet future challenges.

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#### **Short-Term Training Innovations (4):**

Short-term, industry-recognized training programs offer a nimble and effective solution to rapidly shifting labor demands. These programs are particularly valuable in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, and information technology, where employers need workers who can hit the ground running. By focusing on skill acquisition rather than seat time, these programs help participants quickly gain credentials that are aligned with job openings.

Flexibility is key—training must be accessible to adult learners balancing work and family obligations, and it should be offered in both credit and non-credit formats. When thoughtfully designed, short-term training can serve as both an on-ramp to employment and a steppingstone to further education.

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### **Leadership Development (3.5):**

As the workforce ecosystem continues to evolve, leadership development is vital to sustaining progress and driving innovation. Building a new generation of cross-functional leaders requires calculated strategies that bridge silos between adult education, workforce development, corrections, and social services. Leadership programs should emphasize systems thinking, strategic planning, equity, and collaboration, preparing professionals to lead integrated efforts across agencies and sectors. Cross-training strategies, retreats, and interagency exchanges can foster shared understanding and trust. Ultimately, empowering emerging leaders with the skills and vision to lead systemic change will be crucial to building a unified, agile, and equitable workforce development infrastructure.

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At the March 2025 convening, participants ranked the following “buds” as being low ranked but critical for ecosystem growth:

### **Lower-Ranked but Critical Buds**

- **Technology Solutions (3):** Need foundational infrastructure of hardware and software and digital literacy embedded in all programs of study.
- **Data System Improvements (2.5):** Challenges with federal investment and tracking systems, though vital for outcomes reporting.

### **Technology Solutions (3):**

While advances in technology hold tremendous potential to transform education and

workforce training, their effectiveness is contingent upon foundational infrastructure and baseline digital literacy. Many rural and underserved communities still lack reliable internet access, up-to-date hardware and/or software, or the technical support necessary to implement virtual learning platforms and AI-driven tools. Additionally, adult learners must possess fundamental digital skills to engage meaningfully with online content. Without first addressing these prerequisites, the workforce ecosystem cannot fully leverage the promise of emerging technologies. Investment in broadband access, device distribution, and digital literacy instruction must precede or accompany any technology-based solution to ensure impartial implementation and participation.

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#### **Data System Improvements (2.5):**

Robust, interoperable data systems are essential for tracking learner outcomes, measuring program impact, performance outcomes, and informing policy decisions. However, current workforce and education systems often operate in silos with incompatible data standards, making it difficult to assess cross-sector effectiveness. Federal funding and regulatory constraints further hinder progress, and many programs lack the capacity or resources to implement advanced data tools. Despite these challenges, improving data infrastructure remains critical. Accurate, comprehensive data collection enables better decision-making, more targeted services, and increased accountability. Moving forward, coordinated efforts are needed to modernize data systems, establish common metrics, and align performance

indicators across education, workforce, and social service entities.

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## VI. Recommendations and Next Steps

Building on the insights from both convenings, the Collaborative proposes the following:

1. **Launch Working Groups** aligned with top-ranked buds to explore implementation strategies and partner commitments.
2. **Develop a Unified Message** and awareness campaign to educate stakeholders on the adult education-workforce continuum.
3. **Map the Ecosystem** including Venn diagrams of each organization's mission, to identify overlap and potential for synergy.
4. **Create a Shared Lexicon** and operational definitions to streamline cross-agency communication and eliminate confusion.
5. **Host Inter-Agency Retreats** modeled on successful state practices (e.g., Alaska, California, Florida, New Mexico) for silo-breaking dialogue and planning.
6. **Engage Employers** as early co-creators in IET, reentry, and short-term training solutions.
7. **Promote Skills-Based Hiring** in collaboration with national employer associations.
8. **Develop a Policy Influence Strategy** targeting both state leaders and federal agencies to promote sustainable workforce development.

**1. Launch Working Groups** aligned with top-ranked buds to explore implementation strategies and partner commitments.

To translate ideas into action, the Collaborative should form dedicated working groups around the highest-priority “buds,” such as cross-sector integration, reentry education, and skills-based hiring. These groups would include representatives from education, workforce, employer, and policy sectors who can commit to exploring practical steps for implementation. The working groups should establish clear timelines, deliverables, and accountability measures, ensuring that emerging innovations are not only discussed but advanced through real-world collaboration and shared investment.

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**2. Develop a Unified Message** and awareness campaign to educate stakeholders on the adult education-workforce continuum.

A consistent and compelling narrative is essential for building broad support across sectors. The Collaborative should develop a unified message that communicates the full value of adult education and workforce programs—especially the ways they promote economic mobility, social equity, and talent development. A national awareness campaign should be launched to inform policymakers, employers, and the public, using data, success stories, and visuals to highlight the impact of integrated services. This messaging will be critical in influencing funding, partnership engagement, and cultural perceptions of nontraditional learning and career pathways.

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**3. Map the Ecosystem** including Venn diagrams of each organization’s mission, to identify overlap and potential for synergy.

Understanding how each organization contributes to the broader workforce system is key to reducing redundancy and identifying collaborative opportunities. By mapping the missions, visions, goals, and service areas of participating organizations, the Collaborative can visualize where efforts align, where gaps exist, and where resources can be pooled for greater impact. Venn diagrams or similar visual tools can clarify shared priorities, spark joint initiatives, and promote a more coordinated approach to workforce and adult education strategies.

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**4. Create a Shared Lexicon** and operational definitions to streamline cross-agency communication and eliminate confusion.

One of the greatest barriers to collaboration is inconsistent language and terminology across sectors. Developing a shared lexicon of key terms—such as “IET,” “skills-based hiring,” or “short-term credential”—will help ensure that all partners are speaking the same language and interpreting goals and strategies in the same way. This glossary should include operational definitions that clarify how concepts are applied in practice, which will support clearer communication, stronger policy alignment, and more effective program design across agencies and organizations.

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**5. Host Inter-Agency Retreats** modeled on successful state practices (e.g., Alaska, California, Florida, New Mexico) for silo-breaking dialogue and planning.

In states like Florida and Alaska, inter-agency retreats have proven to be effective forums for cross-sector planning and coordination. The Collaborative should host similar retreats at the national level or encourage state-level replication, bringing together leaders from adult education, workforce, corrections, and economic development. These gatherings would foster deeper relationships, build trust, and promote systems-level thinking. States like California and New Mexico have implemented new funding models and robust IET planning and implementation processes that reinforce the need for cross-agency collaboration. By focusing on real-world problem-solving and strategy development, inter-agency retreats can lead to more seamless service delivery and integrated planning.

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**6. Engage Employers** as early co-creators in IET, reentry, and short-term training solutions.

Employers must be viewed not just as end-users of workforce talent but as co-creators of training and education systems, fully engaged from the early planning stages. Their early involvement in program design—especially for Integrated Education and Training (IET), reentry pathways, and short-term credential programs—ensures alignment with labor market demands. Employers can provide valuable insight into current and future skill needs, offer work-based learning opportunities, on-the-job training, host on-site certification and education programs, provide pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities, and even co-fund

training initiatives. Their engagement is crucial to building responsive, demand-driven models that lead directly to employment.

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**7. Promote Skills-Based Hiring** in collaboration with national employer associations.

The Collaborative can help normalize and expand skills-based hiring practices by partnering with national employer associations such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) or the National Association of Manufacturers. These partnerships can facilitate the dissemination of best practices, tools, and policy guidance that encourage employers to evaluate candidates based on demonstrated abilities rather than educational pedigree alone. Promoting skills-based hiring opens doors for a wider talent pool, reduces barriers for nontraditional learners, and aligns well with the goals of adult education and workforce programs.

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**8. Develop a Policy Influence Strategy** targeting both state leaders and federal agencies to promote sustainable workforce development.

To ensure long-term impact, the Collaborative must engage in strategic policy advocacy that elevates the importance of workforce development at both the state and federal levels. This includes identifying champions in government, crafting policy briefs, and participating in public hearings or advisory councils, and being fully engaged with elected officials. The strategy should emphasize return on investment, economic development outcomes, and parity of benefits,

making the case for sustained and increased funding. By influencing policy environments, the Collaborative can help institutionalize the innovations and reforms needed to strengthen the ecosystem for years to come.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The Workforce Ecosystem Collaborative is poised to become a transformative force in shaping a national workforce development and adult education system that is all-encompassing, future-ready, and built on shared values. As the economic landscape continues to evolve rapidly, the need for a cohesive, evenhanded approach to education, workforce training, and employment services has never been greater. The Collaborative's vision centers on breaking down silos, fostering innovation, and ensuring that all learners—regardless of background—have access to meaningful career pathways.

Through ongoing convenings, cross-sector partnerships, and actionable strategies, the Collaborative will continue to align efforts, close systemic gaps, and uplift learners across the country. These engagements provide a crucial platform for workforce, education, employer, and community leaders to share insights, pilot innovative solutions, and build coordinated responses to emerging challenges. By maintaining a strong focus on evidence-based practices and continuous improvement, the Collaborative strengthens the ability of the entire workforce ecosystem to adapt and thrive.

The progress already achieved—and the enthusiasm evident across participating organizations—signal that the time is now to harness the full potential of this ecosystem. With momentum building, the Workforce Ecosystem Collaborative is well positioned to drive national impact, ensuring that today's investments lead to a resilient, comprehensive, and prosperous future workforce. Continued commitment to shared learning, bold collaboration, and a learner-centered vision will be the keys to achieving transformative, lasting change.

**Next Convenings:**

- CEA International Conference, Pittsburgh, PA – August 2025

**Participants:**

- Windy Swearingin, Director of Adult Education, Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
- Sudie Whalen, Senior Technical Assistance Consultant, American Institutes for Research (AIR)
- Sharon Bonney, Chief Executive Officer, COABE
- Shaketta Thomas, President, COABE
- Peggy Kaiser, Executive Director, Correctional Education Association (CEA)
- Kristin Hempel, Adult & Community Programs Director / COABE Region 1 Representative, EASTCONN
- Pat Tyler, Executive Director, National Association of State Directors of Adult Education (NASDAE)
- David Barch, Director of Vendor Relations and Special Projects, National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP)
- Amber Gallup, Director of Adult Education, New Mexico Higher Education Department
- Mitch Rosin, P2C Solutions, LLC
- Kyle Marinelli, Director, Government Affairs, Prism Group
- Deanna Crosson, Vice President of Strategic Accounts, The Center for Work Ethic Development/Aztec Workforce

**Facilitator:**

- Dr. Emma Diaz