

Driving State Initiatives Through Partnerships Rooted in Collective Impact

By Erin E. Risley-Baird, Ph.D.

A PARTNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON LESSONS LEARNED FROM OKLAHOMA'S STATEWIDE INITIATIVE FOR TALENT PIPELINE DEVELOPMENT

Oklahoma Works is the state's talent pipeline development initiative designed to tackle the skills gap between what credentials and skills are available in the workforce today and what will be demanded by the economy in 2025. Multiple state agencies and private partners align on three key strategies: increasing postsecondary educational attainment, expanding and diversifying work-based learning, and utilizing data to drive alignment. Using the collective impact model for change, the state agency partners have collaboratively aligned on common messaging, metrics, and data to prioritize resources and capacity, and make a collective difference in the lives of Oklahomans and to the state's economy.

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driving state initiatives

THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS ROOTED IN COLLECTIVE IMPACT

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INTRODUCTION

Oklahoma Works, the state's talent pipeline development initiative led by Governor Mary Fallin, began with the identification of a clear problem: the skills gap.¹ In 2016, 46 percent of Oklahomans were estimated to have the attainment of a high school diploma or less. In 2025, only 24 percent of new jobs will be available to those with a high school diploma or less. Projections demonstrate that the most growth in newly created jobs to the economy and total jobs available will be in those occupations that require some sort of postsecondary education: an industry-recognized credential, certificate, or a two- or four-year college degree. At the start of this work in 2014, we had 10 years to upskill our workforce and close the gap; now, we only have seven.

In 2015, numerous state agencies that play a role in workforce development were convened to develop goals and strategies designed to solve the skills gap problem. In addition to leading agencies on workforce development, such as the State Department of Education, the State Regents for Higher Education, and the Department of Career and Technology Education, partners also included those agencies not traditionally viewed as workforce development partners: Department of Corrections, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, and the Department of Rehabilitation Services, among others. Together, representatives developed a strategic plan on how to close the skills gap in 10 years.

With the goal of increasing degrees or credentials, Oklahoma Works strategic planning began in 2015 with our state agency partners, business leaders, and others to align our efforts to strengthen the talent pipeline and reduce duplication and fill gaps in the system. The common vision was a well-coordinated and effective education to workforce

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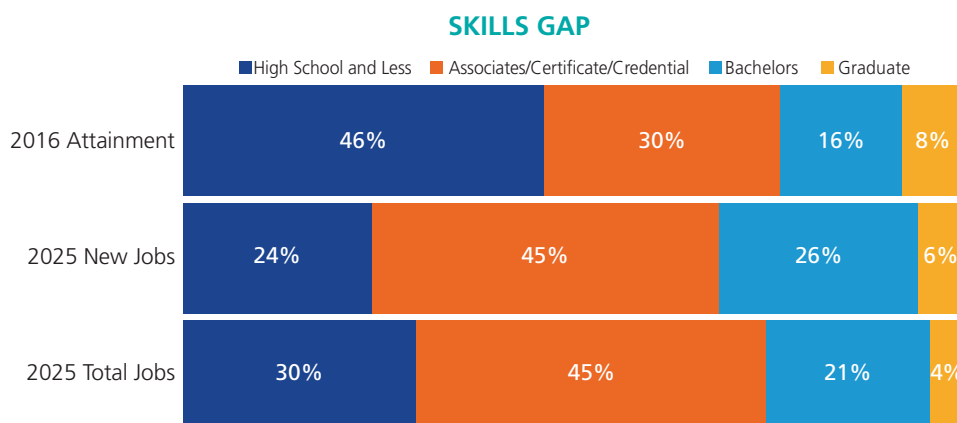


Figure 1. Oklahoma's Skills Gap showing 2016 educational attainment, new job entry-level projected requirements by 2025, and total jobs entry level projected requirements by 2025.

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The report demonstrates that Oklahoma also experiences disparities in attainment between urban and rural populations, with rural areas achieving lower attainment levels, and disparities among African American, Hispanics, and Native American populations achieving lower attainment than their Caucasian counterparts.

pipeline that connects the various partners, systems, and initiatives towards the common goal of preparing Oklahomans for the world of work and ensures Oklahoma's businesses can hire the talent they need to grow and succeed. In short, our common goal was wealth generation for all Oklahomans so that they may achieve the American Dream.

From this work, three key strategies emerged to align efforts and were developed:

- increasing the educational attainment of all Oklahomans,
- expanding and diversifying work-based learning opportunities, and,
- using data to drive alignment with the state's 100 Critical Occupations.

INCREASING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

As Oklahoma's skills gap chart indicates, 22 percent of Oklahomans must not only obtain a high school diploma, but also must achieve postsecondary attainment to be competitive in our state's future job market, and to ensure our state is positioned for continued success. It is well-established that education is critical to social and economic development. Less education is correlated with higher unemployment rates², lower wages³, and negative health outcomes⁴ such as increased mortality rates, obesity rates, and heart disease, and higher poverty, among other negative impacts.

Statewide, Oklahoma's postsecondary enrollment is declining, and, many of the state's adults have some college, yet no degree.⁵ As a result, many Oklahomans have debt associated with postsecondary enrollment, yet do not have the wage boost affiliated with successful attainment increase, further impacting economic success. A 2017 study was commissioned to understand why Oklahomans do not complete high school, college, and career and technical training.⁶ The report demonstrates that Oklahoma also experiences disparities in attainment between urban and rural populations, with rural areas achieving lower attainment levels, and disparities among African American, Hispanics, and Native American populations achieving lower attainment than their Caucasian counterparts.

Yet, despite the positive impacts of educational attainment, Oklahoma lags the nation and demonstrates sig-

nificant disparities among populations. Of the key findings in the 2017 attainment study, three became central drivers to the attainment work of the state:

- Oklahomans with the lowest attainment (no high school diploma or equivalency) reported the lowest value perception of increased education;
- Oklahomans reported a lack of expectations from family and the community to attend and complete postsecondary education and training; and,
- Many Oklahomans quit because the education and training was not relevant to their work or home life, as opposed to the common belief that these individuals were not able to compete academically.

By Executive Order, Governor Fallin issued the state goal for attainment, called Launch Oklahoma⁷, indicating 70 percent of Oklahomans ages 18-64 must have a postsecondary degree or credential past high school by the year 2025. To meet the goal and the future workforce demand, Oklahoma must produce or recruit an additional 110,300 degrees and credentials each year through 2025. As a state, we must address the barriers of community expectations, increasing value or the perception of value, and the relevance of education and training, if there is any hope of increasing attainment at the rate that can compete with industry demand.

EXPANDING AND DIVERSIFYING WORK-BASED LEARNING

A strategy to address Oklahomans' struggle with identifying the relevance of education and training with their work or home life is work-based learning. Work-based learning is a continuum of activities that occur, in part or in whole, in the workplace. Such activities provide the learner with hands-on, real-world work experience designed to provide significance to the education and training experience. Activities can range from short-term exposure opportunities, such as job shadowing, to longer-term opportunities such as internships, expanding to Registered Apprenticeships, in which the end result is a fully-skilled, full-time employee.

Work-based learning is a win-win for both participants and employers. Participants receive hands-on exploration and experience that not only help focus their career journey, but also makes them more desirable can-

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didates on the job market. Businesses receive the benefit of reaching back earlier in the talent pipeline to expose their future workforce to industry and business needs, and competitively recruit the top-talent the state has to offer.

The Oklahoma Legislature agreed when they passed Senate Bill 1171, signed into law by Governor Fallin⁸, which established a state-funded work-based learning program to pursue the expansion and diversification of work-based learning opportunities. By targeting state resources to achieve state-wide expansion, Oklahoma expects to reach its goal of increasing the number of quality work-based learning programs in the state to 20,000 by the year 2020.⁹

Oklahoma will be employing a multi-pronged strategy initially to create an infrastructure to connect its citizens to internships and apprenticeships beyond the traditional word-of-mouth model. Additionally, the program incentivizes employers to increase their offerings of internships and apprenticeships, as well as to increase the diversity of their participants to assist the state with its equity goals. Moreover, this business-funding-business strategy utilizes business registration fees to establish industry-led competencies to ensure the quality of the program and those who complete internships and apprenticeships with program-registered businesses. With less than two months' implementation, Oklahoma has already doubled the number of 2018 Registered Apprenticeship sponsors from the number of those who registered in 2017.

USING DATA TO DRIVE ALIGNMENT

Despite solid goals to increase attainment and utilize work-based learning as a catalyst to postsecondary completion, state agency partners still struggled with the coming together on priorities influenced by labor market information (LMI). Similar to other states, Oklahoma's state agencies employ an array of economic tools and economists who have the expertise to interpret industry and workforce trends. Each agency and expert creates recommendations on the forward trajectory of each agency and the populations for whom they serve.

When each agency's data indicate a slightly adjusted direction, it presents difficulties with which to agree on priorities under a collective goal. Individuals who are experienced with data can attest to the terminology of "validity" and "reliability" of a statistical test. Though each agency's economic data are considered valid, they each use different tools with slightly different methodologies regarding in-demand and high-wage occupations and industry growth trends. When the data are compared across state agencies, it begins to present a reliability problem in the messaging to the public as all are defined

slightly differently, and each produce a slightly different picture of what workforce demands look like within the state. Such inconsistencies make common messaging and collective impact incredibly challenging.

To facilitate statewide change at scale, all partners must not only share the vision and the goals, they must also utilize a shared metric for which to be held accountable. Quality data provide a compelling way to unify a collective on a central problem statement. Oklahoma's 100 Critical Occupations list¹⁰ has become the unifying tool to drive alignment and the priorities of our state and its agencies.

To identify statewide priorities, the Oklahoma Department of Commerce identified driver and complementary economic systems, those industry clusters that contribute most to the economic wealth of the state, in order to prioritize limited state resources, and drive the business recruitment efforts for the state. From these economic systems, we identified a methodology to determine critical occupations for these industries. The methodology is based on a variety of factors to meet the state's goals, and includes projected job growth, turnover due to aging populations or burnout, higher than average wages, and prioritizing post-secondary educational attainment, among other factors.

It is challenging as a state and an agency to communicate to industry groups or businesses why a particular occupation they view as critical to their business somehow does not appear within the "top" 100.

Despite the best message-design or public relations campaigns, some companies continue to question the validity of a list that does not represent their needs. Or, individuals in career paths not on the list appear disheartened when a career they value, appears to not be valued by the state. Though the list and methodology have their limitations, the data contained therein provide a way in which we as a state can orient our work differently to achieve greater impact. With each agency's singular efforts becoming a collective effort, we increase our chances as a state to drive change at scale.

For example, our education institutions have done remarkable work in alignment to our state's labor market priorities. The State Regents for Higher Education have begun utilizing the list as criteria for the creation and retirement of new education programs in the state. To be approved, applicants must justify how the program aligns with the state's priorities, with few exceptions. The Department of Career and Technology Education uses the list to validate alignment and articulate the vital need for CareerTech programs to meet labor market demands. Meanwhile, the State Department of Education, which governs common education in the state, is utilizing the

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list to develop their “career endorsements” for students, as well as a statewide web-based platform for career exploration for all common education students.

Although the list is limited to 100 occupations critical to the state’s driver economies, it can also be expanded by identifying similar skills, knowledge, and abilities across occupations to develop the pathways to critical occupations. Skills-based processes such as these assist job seekers with understanding how stacking skills may open new opportunities, and assist businesses in gaining a better understanding of which skills are available in their applicant pool. Stacking skills, and the credentials and degrees which certify sets of skills, help build up an individual’s qualifications and assist them with moving along a career pathway.

The Critical Occupations list in its entirety represents only 24 percent of all jobs in 2025. In reality, we need the additional 76 percent filled to keep our economy churning. The adoption of the list by our partners to drive policy and outreach provides the opportunity to move from isolated impact to collective impact. It also demonstrates that complex, government systems can be flexible and responsive to business demand.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND THE SHIFTING OF COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Essential tenets of the Collective Impact Framework¹¹, the theory of change guiding the development of Oklahoma Works, include a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations. These guiding principles were our focus as we established the framework for the initiative and will continue to be the focus as we consider how the work accomplished over the past few years will be sustained. However, as the backbone organization to the initiative, three critical components of Collective Impact also serve as lessons learned, and as a result, necessary reminders. In a 2018 address to local Oklahoma leaders, Richard Laine, president, DFI Consulting and former director of education for the National Governors Association, identified continuous challenges in Collective Impact that must be addressed to continue the work, including coordinated and continuous communication, overcoming singular perspectives and building trust, and joint metrics for determining baselines and measuring success.

Frequency and quality of communication is key to the success of complex-system work. Our common vision and common goals must speak to all members of the talent pipeline: educational systems, economic development, the workforce system, and targeted industry growth sectors. Leaders can easily conflate messaging with communication. Messaging is often one-sided, and although the goal of the sender can be to clarify or send a directive to a particular audience, it rarely requires participation on behalf of the received. Communication on the other hand, is all about shared understanding. Utilizing a common problem statement – the skills gap – and a

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common mission – ensuring all Oklahomans can achieve the American Dream – invites shared understanding and commitment toward developing activities with the purpose of a common goal. Disruptions and misalignment occur when messaging is leveraged over communication.

Additionally, singular perspectives must be overcome in order to build and maintain trust. Stakeholders are accustomed to focusing on the day-to-day challenges of their organizations’ work and sometimes are not familiar with or have the capacity to solve system-wide issues. The bureaucratic world of state government often uses the term “siloing,” indicating the frequent disconnect between organizations that taxpayers envision work together to address systemic problems faced by their citizens.


As the initiative’s backbone, our organization struggled early on with messaging versus communication, and overcoming “siloed” perspectives. A misplaced message intending to ensure a task is accomplished but instead is pitched as a directive can easily create discontent within a partner agency. Similarly, a hastily created scheduling invitation that displaces a key member of the core team can harm transparency by planting a seed of distrust, which can easily derail a few weeks-worth of action items. Guaranteeing communication as a participatory and habitual process is essential for operations and for ensuring partners can continue to overcome their singular perspectives for the collective needs of the group.

Finally, shared understanding of joint metrics in order to determine baselines and measure success is essential to the success and sustainability of the work. Under Oklahoma Works, our partners identified individual agency metrics that would guide their work, as well as joint metrics across state agencies. Then, we aligned metrics with our local partners to ensure a common mission and a common method for holding ourselves accountable. Oklahoma’s 100 Critical Occupations list encouraged alignment on career exposure, education institution program development, competency-mapping, and outreach. Next steps are to analyze how our aligned efforts have closed the skills and attainment gap, revise, and continue with the good work.

CONCLUSION

As our governor ends her second – and last – term this calendar year, our partners are thoroughly reviewing what was accomplished over the past four years but also carefully evaluating our successes and failures to make recommendations to the new administration on how the talent pipeline work will continue to build on the strong foundation.

We understand that complex systems take time to change, and it takes even longer for the data to reflect those changes. Yet, there are little victories happening all over Oklahoma – and the rest of the nation – with regard

to strengthening talent development. In Oklahoma, we have seen great progress with focus on our educational attainment and work-based learning related to the State's Critical Occupations. Although we have experienced some hiccups along the way, our guiding principles also continue to endure. We know that our collective efforts play an active role in community and workforce development and together, we can make a difference in the lives of Oklahomans. 

ENDNOTES

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