



Update to New Jersey's *OPPORTUNITY AGENDA*

A COLLECTIVE ROADMAP FOR ACTION
AND A FUTURE READY NEW JERSEY

SEPTEMBER 2025

INTRODUCTION

New Jersey faces complex economic, technological, social, and demographic changes.

Our economy continues to shift toward industries that rely on new knowledge, technologies, entrepreneurship, and innovation to drive productivity. Entry to good jobs in these industries, and economic mobility more broadly, increasingly requires postsecondary education, including degrees, certificates, and industry-recognized credentials that lead to good jobs and career pathways with family-sustaining wages and, ultimately, healthy, vibrant communities. We must prepare all New Jerseyans for the technologies that are changing how we live, work, and learn, especially workers who are high risk of displacement. Our residents also need analytical, creative thinking, communication, and other “robot-proof” human skills to navigate a changing world.

Helping more New Jerseyans attain postsecondary credentials and degrees of value is critical. New Jersey has historically enjoyed its position as a state with a well-educated workforce that has been a driver of innovation and economic growth, but an evolving economy with rapidly changing technologies (including generative AI) requires workers to have more than a high school education. National studies consistently predict that there will be a [shortage of workers](#) with postsecondary credentials, and New Jersey is anticipating significant job growth in occupations requiring postsecondary education. Further, the evidence remains strong that individuals with postsecondary education have [higher earnings and lower unemployment rates](#) than those with less education, and they are more likely [to vote, to be engaged in their communities, and to have better health](#).

Building an equitable, prosperous, and future-ready New Jersey calls for a relentless focus on helping more New Jerseyans achieve postsecondary degrees and credentials that lead to genuine economic mobility and opportunity. **Joining together to do this work is both a moral and an economic imperative: without concerted, collaborative, cross-sector action, the status quo will leave too many New Jerseyans behind and make it impossible for our economy to remain competitive.**

New Jersey's community colleges offer a unique value proposition to address these needs, based on access, quality, affordability, and innovation, and we stand ready to work with all partners for the benefit of our state.

Each year, New Jersey's community colleges provide life-changing opportunities to more than 240,000 New Jerseyans, including more than 4 in 10 of all undergraduate students and close to half of the undergraduate students in our state's public colleges and universities. Our students constitute the core of New Jersey's skilled and educated workforce and are essential to the success of New Jersey's innovation economy. Community college graduates power the state's key industries, including health care, technology, infrastructure, renewable energy, manufacturing, and supply chain management. Many of the teachers, nurses, police officers, firefighters, and other first responders who live and work in our communities are community college graduates.

Our community colleges are driven by our unique roles as anti-poverty, pro-economic mobility engines. We serve and support New Jerseyans from every geographic corner of the state and at every stage of their academic, career, and life journeys. In addition to high school students, we educate adult and working learners, student parents, refugees, immigrants, justice-impacted individuals, unemployed and underemployed individuals, individuals with disabilities, and veterans. Helping this diverse array of students achieve academic, social, and economic mobility is our core mission.

New Jersey's community colleges play vital roles as comprehensive institutions that prepare undergraduates for transfer to a four-year college or university and for the workforce. In recent years, we have had an expanding workforce development focus. This includes educating adult, working, and lifelong learners, many of whom turn to their local community colleges for shorter-term credentials tied to career advancement. It also includes helping employers, who are increasingly turning to community colleges to solve workforce challenges through a variety of creative and dynamic partnerships.

As New Jersey's community colleges continue to lay the groundwork for our evolving economy, we recognize that there is more work to do. This includes acknowledging that academic and economic opportunities are not equally available to all New Jerseyans, with racial, ethnic, and geographic disparities persisting.

NEW JERSEY'S OPPORTUNITY AGENDA

In the spring of 2024, the state's 18 community colleges came together through the **New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC)** to adopt a bold vision for the future with the release of [**New Jersey's Opportunity Agenda: Building Pathways to Equity and Economic Prosperity**](#). Because of the unique missions of community colleges in educating diverse students of all ages and backgrounds and in helping employers meet critical workforce needs, this collective blueprint recognized that community colleges are well-positioned to lead a new course for New Jersey—one built on student success and other innovations underway on all of our campuses and on the urgent need to mobilize deeper collaboration with employers, unions, educators, workforce development practitioners, community-based organizations, and government. The **Opportunity Agenda** was designed to address the fundamental need for more New Jerseyans to successfully complete postsecondary education, both to enable them to access jobs that pay family-sustaining wages and to help employers meet their need for an educated, skilled workforce.

Together and with partners, we have made much progress based on the **Opportunity Agenda**, implementing new programs on our campuses, launching a range of statewide initiatives through the Council, and working with state policymakers on a package of bills.

We are now using this report to update and reframe several of the original strategies, incorporating what we have learned to date and preparing an action roadmap for 2026 and beyond.

We seek to address both current and emerging opportunities by renewing our call for a shared commitment to action, policies, and innovations that expand economic and educational mobility, build a skilled workforce, and promote broad-based economic prosperity and healthy, vibrant communities.

ADOPTING A NEW, AMBITIOUS EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT GOAL FOR NEW JERSEY: “75 X 2040”

Given the rapidly changing economy and to further drive our progress into the future, we urge New Jersey to adopt a new, ambitious educational attainment goal, one that incorporates an explicit focus on measuring economic outcomes as well as increasing attainment rates.

The new goal would be for **75 percent of New Jersey adults in the labor market to have postsecondary degrees or credentials of value by 2040** — defined as degrees and credentials that lead to jobs that pay wages or salaries that exceed the national median earnings of a high school graduate by at least 15 percent.

Community colleges have a vital role to play, but meeting this aspirational attainment goal — “75 x 2040” — will require many government, employer, labor, workforce development, philanthropic, social justice, and community partners, and a relentless, cross-sector focus on implementing this updated *Opportunity Agenda*.

Achieving 75 x 2040 means helping an estimated additional 1.5 million New Jerseyans to achieve postsecondary degrees and credentials of value — clearly an “all hands on deck” goal. This will include providing support and guidance to all high school students to help them understand their options for postsecondary education. We must also provide support and guidance to all adult students and working learners, including those who are low-income, unemployed, underemployed, dislocated workers, student parents, students who are the first in their families to go to college, justice-impacted individuals, individuals with disabilities, and others — regardless of where they live in our state.

We seek to formalize a statewide **Future Ready New Jersey Economic Mobility and Community Vibrancy Coalition** that brings together a wide variety of partners on a regular basis, helping us set mutually designed interim goals as we jointly pursue 75 x 2040.

Like many other states, since 2017, New Jersey has been working toward a 2025 educational attainment goal of 65 percent. The original “65 x 25” goal contributed to efforts in New Jersey to expand access to and completion of postsecondary education, including at our community colleges. Since the launch of 65 x 25, we have made tremendous progress, moving from a 51 percent educational attainment rate in 2018 to 59 percent in 2023.

Currently, however, less than half (49 percent) of New Jerseyans have postsecondary degrees or credentials that meet the outcome criteria of leading to jobs with wages or salaries that exceed those of the average high school graduate, and 41 percent of New Jersey adults have no formal education or workforce training beyond high school.

We urge our partners and our state’s policymakers to join us in implementing the *Opportunity Agenda* and in adopting the new 75 x 2040 goal, and we remain eager to work with all who share this commitment to economic mobility, broadly shared prosperity, and a future-ready New Jersey.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

As we update the *Opportunity Agenda* and pursue 75 x 2040, New Jersey’s community colleges commit to three foundational elements that will undergird our work moving forward.

Enhancing Collaboration Between Community Colleges

Our 18 community colleges are strongest when we work together as a vibrant and innovative network. With an evolving landscape for New Jersey’s higher education institutions, our community colleges will capitalize on our agility and creativity to

broaden the number of programs and partnerships we offer together across our state. In addition, the colleges will expand opportunities for collaboration in operations, including through the continued use of the joint purchasing of goods and services through our existing Joint Purchasing Consortium and other structures as appropriate.

While each community college remains an autonomous institution with the flexibility to respond to specific community and regional needs, we will find more ways to work together efficiently across our campuses, taking advantage of our common mission and our individual strengths.

Strengthening an Action Coalition of Cross Sector Partners

New Jersey's community colleges have always embraced the notion of community, serving as critical cornerstone institutions in each of our counties and bringing together a wide array of partners and resources to strengthen our democracy, our neighborhoods, and our civil society. We will redouble our commitment to expanding statewide and local partnerships to support the attainment of postsecondary credentials and degrees and to improve the lives of our state's residents. We know that to help more New Jersey high school and adult students access and succeed in postsecondary education and beyond, we must work side-by-side with our partners, including comprehensive and vocational-technical high schools, four-year colleges and universities, employers, unions, social justice and community-based organizations, workforce development, philanthropic and charitable organizations, and government.

Making Stronger Use of Data

We will work together to make stronger use of data to inform our decisions. We will build a new partnership with the New Jersey State Data System and other entities to make data available to community college leaders that is useful, actionable, and timely.

Legislative Action

Following the release of the original *Opportunity Agenda*, NJCCC developed a series of policy memos fleshing out key strategies and worked with leaders in our State Legislature on a package of new bills. We also lent support to several existing bills that we believed would achieve *Opportunity Agenda* goals. We will continue to work with state policy makers on the following bills, including:

- A4220 / S3178 - Directs Secretary of Higher Education to establish academic credit and reverse credit transfer standards; establishes New Jersey Transfer Ombudsman within Office of Secretary of Higher Education.
- A5182 / S4021 - Modernizes the responsibilities of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges.
- A5183 - S4009 - Directs DOLWD to develop and maintain an industry-valued credential list.
- A5211 / S4023 - Establishes New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities Initiative Act.
- A5212 / S4010 - Provides for the expansion of social services supports at county colleges.
- A5213 - S4012 - Establishes "New Economy Opportunity Skills System Pilot Program" to strengthen alignment and collaboration between local workforce development boards and community colleges.
- A5502 / S4419 - Revises provisions of "County College Contracts Law"; permits bidder disqualification due to prior negative experience.

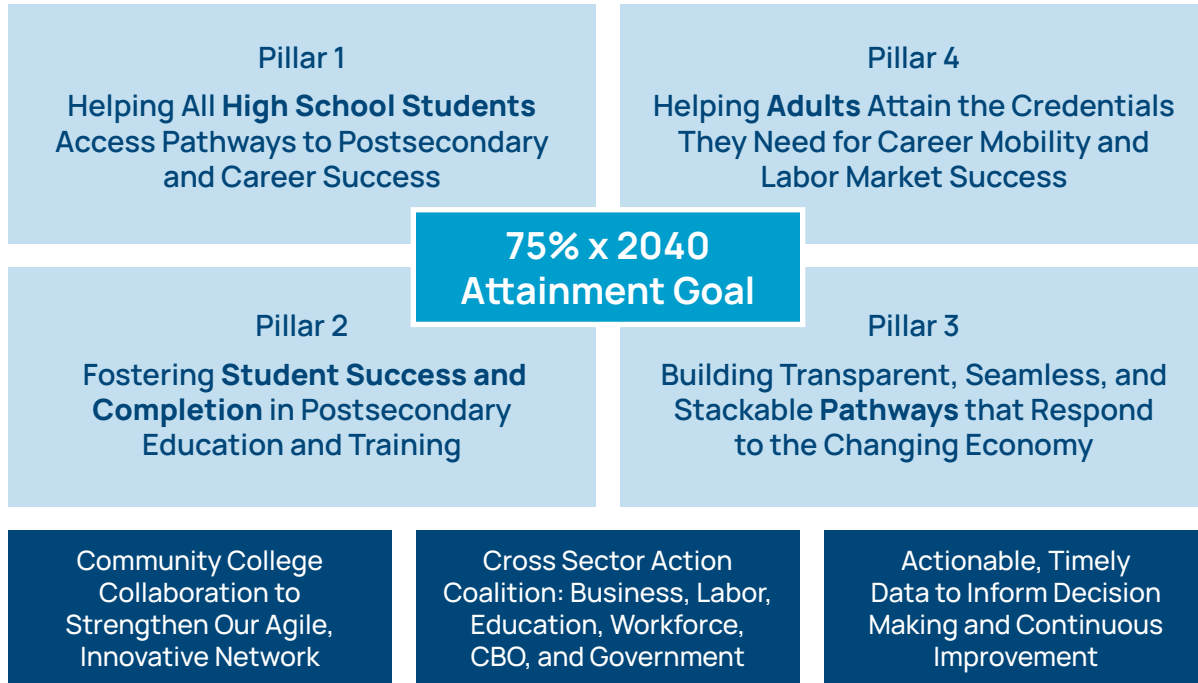
Five of these bills (A4220, A5182, A5183, A5211, and 5213) have been passed by the full Assembly with bipartisan support, and we are grateful for the leadership of both our state legislators as well as our partners who have testified on our behalf. We hope to continue to achieve progress on these *Opportunity Agenda* bills.

ACTION PILLARS

To help more New Jerseyans attain postsecondary degrees and credentials of value, we are committed to the following action pillars. Some call for new legislation or funding, while others advocate for new partnerships between community colleges and with external stakeholders. Many will be undertaken by community colleges themselves, reinforcing and building on progress they are already making. These action pillars represent our collective priorities and will shape our focus in the years ahead.

We believe implementing these strategies is the best route to equitable academic, social, and economic mobility for all New Jerseyans and broadly shared prosperity for our communities.

Pillars of the *Opportunity Agenda*



PILLAR 1: Helping All High School Students Access Pathways to Postsecondary and Career Success

- **Strategy 1:** Ensure all high school students have the opportunity to earn at least six college credits while in high school

Solution: Create a consistent, statewide dual enrollment program built around community colleges, providing all high school students an opportunity to achieve a minimum of six college credits, free of charge for low-income and historically underserved populations.

- Position NJ's community colleges as the preferred partner for high-quality, career-aligned dual and concurrent enrollment programs.
- Promote and unify these programs under a statewide brand, ensuring broad awareness and consistent messaging.

Legislative Action:

- **Pass A2899 / S144** establishing the NJ College Ready Students Program to provide 6 credits tuition-free per year for 11th and 12th graders based on Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) eligibility criteria.
- **Pass A4220 / S3178**, which would provide for the transfer of dual enrollment credits.

■ **Strategy 2: Support early career exploration and postsecondary planning to ensure all high school students know their options and have a plan for further education and a career**

Solution: Continue to work collaboratively with high schools to integrate career exploration, program awareness, and structured postsecondary planning into students' academic experiences.

■ **Strategy 3. Strengthen collaborations with County Vocational-Technical Schools and comprehensive high schools to expand access to industry credentials and college credit**

Solution: Expand Early College High School models that allow students to earn both a high school diploma and a certificate or associate degree within four or five years.

Solution: Expand partnerships between community colleges and county vocational-technical schools, such as college and career advisement, shared instructional facilities, and the seamless alignment of Perkins-funded programs across K-12 and community college to enhance efficiency and student outcomes.

PILLAR 2: Fostering Student Success and Completion In Postsecondary Education and Training

■ Strategy 1: Make community college tuition-free for more New Jerseyans

Solution: Ensure individuals with adjusted gross household incomes up to \$125,000 can attend a New Jersey community college tuition free through an expansion of the Community College Opportunity Grant (CCOG) program.

■ Strategy 2: Expand evidence-based Community College Student Success initiatives

Solution: Support efforts of colleges to implement evidence-based student success strategies through sharing of promising practices.

Solution: Invest in a statewide student success initiative that supports proven strategies such as small advising caseloads, momentum incentives, mentoring, tutoring, career development, and early community engagement to help all students including those who are low-income, first generation, student parents, justice-impacted students, students with disabilities, veterans, and others.

■ Strategy 3: Strengthen wraparound, holistic student supports through cross-sector partnerships to meet basic needs of students

Solution: Continue to expand collaborative efforts of community colleges, state and local social service agencies, employers, and community-based organizations to address students' basic needs—including food, housing, transportation, health care, mental health, and childcare—to remove barriers to persistence and completion.

Legislative Action:

- **Pass A5212 / S4010** - Provides for the expansion of social services supports at county colleges.

- **Strategy 4. Align academic and workforce programs and services to ensure equitable support for all learners**

Solution: Explore innovative models that better integrate academic and workforce education to create a more seamless student experience. Prioritize strategies that provide all learners — whether enrolled in credit or noncredit programs — with equitable access to high-quality services and supports such as advising, career development, campus facilities, learning supports, and basic needs assistance.

- **Strategy 5. Prioritize strategies that support on-time, affordable completion**

Solution: Advance strategies that increase access, affordability, and efficiency in credential attainment by expanding accelerated and flexible learning pathways, such as developmental education reform, shortened terms, and cross-institutional online course sharing.

PILLAR 3: Building Transparent, Seamless, and Stackable Pathways That Respond to the Changing Economy

- **Strategy 1. Modernize and reenergize the General Education curriculum**

Solution: Complete the in-progress redesign of the General Education curriculum that includes an essential learning outcomes framework to prepare students with twenty-first century intellectual and practical skills, including critical and creative thinking, effective communication, quantitative and scientific reasoning, and problem-solving abilities that align with evolving academic and workforce expectations.

- **Strategy 2. Prepare all students to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) responsibly and effectively**

Solution: Ensure that every graduate is equipped with the foundational knowledge and ethical understanding to use AI as a tool for productivity and innovation.

■ **Strategy 3. Embed experiential learning and real-world skill development in all degree programs**

Solution: Ensure more students engage in active and applied learning through opportunities such as project-based learning, community-engaged coursework, high quality paid internships, and registered apprenticeships.

Solution: Partner with the business community to promote the hiring of more community college students in high quality, paid internships. Expand the Career Accelerator internship program administered by the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education to provide funding to employers who hire college students in paid internships and expand outreach to encourage community college students to participate.

■ **Strategy 4. Integrate industry-valued credentials and microcredentials into academic programs**

Solution: Embed stackable, workforce-aligned credentials into more degree pathways to enhance employability and support lifelong learning.

Solution: Partner with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD) to develop and maintain an Industry-Valued Credential List to guide community college efforts.

Legislative Action:

- **Pass A5183/S4009** - Directs DOLWD to develop and maintain an industry-valued credential list.

■ **Strategy 5. Prepare to expand access to Workforce Pell for high-demand careers**

Solution: Build institutional capacity to maximize forthcoming federal Workforce Pell funding to support short-term, high-value credential programs in high-skill, high-wage, high-demand fields.

■ **Strategy 6. Develop coordinated statewide and regional career pathways**

Solution: Collaborate across institutions to design clear, stackable pathways that connect credentials to degrees and support continuous learning and career advancement.

- Expand on successful models (NJBioFutures, NJ Film Academy, NJ Manufacturing Skills Initiative) to build public-private partnerships tied to industry needs.
- Build a sustainability model for the **NJ Pathways to Career Opportunities Initiative**.

Legislative Action:

- **Pass A5211 / S4023** - Establishes New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities Initiative Act.

■ **Strategy 7. Strengthen transfer alignment with four-year institutions**

Solution: Ensure that programs are designed to lead to transfer in the major through close collaboration with higher education stakeholders.

Legislative Action:

- **Pass A4220 / S3178** - Directs Secretary of Higher Education to establish academic credit and reverse credit transfer standards; establishes New Jersey Transfer Ombudsperson within Office of Secretary of Higher Education.

■ **Strategy 8: Develop a consistent, statewide approach to Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)**

Solution: Develop a statewide CPL policy to boost awareness and usage of CPL, addressing transparency, affordability, access, and quality to help more adults complete postsecondary degrees and credentials.

■ Strategy 9. Launch applied baccalaureate degrees at community colleges

Solution: Pursue policy and statute changes to introduce applied bachelor's programs in high-demand fields to expand access to workforce-relevant, affordable four-year degrees.

PILLAR 4: Helping Adults Attain the Credentials They Need for Career Mobility and Labor Market Success

■ Strategy 1. Reimagine the adult workforce development system

Solution: Collaborate with Workforce Development Boards to modernize and integrate programs such as SNAP and TANF Employment and Training (E&T) programs, creating a cohesive, outcomes-driven system focused on upward mobility.

Solution: Collaborate with state entities to strengthen the state's comprehensive adult basic education / adult literacy strategy that connects the variety of programs and investments and enhances pathways to earning industry-valued credentials.

Solution: Expand postsecondary opportunities for adults with disabilities to earn industry-valued credentials.

Solution: Modernize New Jersey's Workforce Development Partnership Fund and Supplemental Workforce Fund for Basic Skills to create a New Economy Opportunity Skills Fund for community college workforce and literacy programs and to address the impacts of AI in the workplace and prepare New Jerseyans for jobs of the future.

Legislative Action:

- **Pass A5213 - S4012** - Establishes "New Economy Opportunity Skills System Pilot Program" to strengthen alignment and collaboration between local workforce development boards and community colleges

■ Strategy 2. Deepen partnerships with nonprofits and other community organizations

Solution: Expand collaboration with libraries, nonprofits, and adult-serving organizations to meet adults where they are and connect them to learning and career pathways.

■ Strategy 3. Target support to incumbent workers and ALICE households

Solution: Design and deliver programs that serve working adults and the 36% of New Jersey households living below the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold, with flexible, career-aligned pathways that lead to economic advancement.

Solution: Build partnerships with employers to expand opportunities for current workers to attend community college to earn credentials and degrees of value for economic mobility through employer-funded tuition assistance programs, the Community College Opportunity Grant program, and other state and federal financial aid programs.

CONCLUSION

Through the implementation of these bold policy initiatives and the relentless pursuit of the ambitious 75 x 2040 educational attainment goal, New Jersey community colleges are committed to leading the nation in creating a blueprint for a sustainable future grounded in equity, resilience, collaboration, and broadly shared prosperity.

We are grateful to all who sign on as partners.