

Introduction

The Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) was established in 1989 at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. OCCRL is affiliated with the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership in the College of Education. Our mission is to use research and evaluation methods to improve policies, programs, and practices to enhance community college education and transition to college for diverse learners at the state, national, and international levels. Projects of this office are supported by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), along with other state, federal, and private and not-for-profit organizations. The contents of publications do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of our sponsors or the University of Illinois. Comments or inquiries about our publications are welcome and should be directed to OCCRL@illinois.edu.

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Background

Pathways to Results (PTR) is aimed at improving the effectiveness and impact of pathways and programs of study that extend from the secondary and adult levels to the postsecondary level. Over the last decade the discussion of career pathways with multiple entry and exit points, including transfer to and completion of four-year degree programs, has increased in Illinois as it has nationwide. Consistent with federal law on Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education law, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and numerous other initiatives that emphasize college and career readiness for youth and adults, the idea of pathways is becoming ubiquitous to P-20 education. Pathways that strive to assist all students to obtain successful outcomes in their transition to and attainment of credentials and family-wage employment are vital to our nation's future. Collaboration among P-20 education; business, industry and labor; workforce, adult and community-based providers; parents and students, and other key stakeholders is integral to the successful implementation of pathways.

PTR begins with team members and partners focusing on critical problems that get in the way of student success. These problems are identified when the teams use student-level data to identify gaps in outcomes between racial, gender, low-income, and other underserved groups. Major processes and practices are assessed to understand how contributing factors create the identified problems and impede student success. Implementation and evaluation plans are designed to create and ensure quality pathway solutions are achieved immediately and over time.

Pathways to Results (PTR) is an outcomes-focused, equity-guided process to improve pathways that support student transition to and through postsecondary education and employment. PTR focuses on addressing equity gaps between diverse learner groups and continuously improving processes and practices critical to student success, including retention, completion of postsecondary credentials, and transition to employment.

“The PTR process enhances relationships with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders and provides a systematic, formal framework for sustaining and building them.”

— Melanie Phillips, Southwestern Illinois College Partnership

Guiding Principles

In 2008, Illinois adopted the National Career Clusters® Framework (Advance CTE, no date) to facilitate curriculum reform at the secondary and postsecondary levels by better aligning curriculum with employer needs. *Illinois’ Principles to Guide Career Pathways and Programs of Study Implementation and Improvement* (Kirby & Bragg, 2015) help practitioners engage in curriculum and instructional reforms that facilitate student transition to postsecondary education and employment. The six guiding principles are summarized below.

ILLINOIS’ PROGRAMS OF STUDY GUIDING PRINCIPLES
1. Leadership, organization and support – Career pathways, career pathway systems, and programs of study are led and supported by P–20 educators and collaborative partners.
2. Access, equity and opportunity – All students have access to educational opportunities at multiple entry points and receive support services that lead to equitable outcomes.
3. Alignment and transition – Curriculum, programs, and credentials are aligned to facilitate student preparation, progression, and success.
4. Enhanced curriculum and instruction – Curriculum and pedagogy offer rigorous and relevant instruction that enhances learning and enables students to master competencies that align with industry-recognized standards and credentials
5. Professional preparation and development – Comprehensive and continuous professional development is delivered to enhance the recruitment, preparation, and retention of qualified instructional, support, and administrative personnel.
6. Accountability and program improvement – Data are collected, shared, and utilized to map student progression through pathways, improve student outcomes, and demonstrate accountability.
For a full description of <i>Illinois’ Principles to Guide Career Pathways and Programs of Study Implementation and Improvement</i> , including the six guiding principles and design elements, see http://ocrl.illinois.edu/files/Projects/pos/cp-principles-2015.pdf

Illinois’ Approach

Illinois’ approach to Career Clusters, Career Pathways, Programs of Study, Bridges, and other transition programs provides a comprehensive vision to ensure that all learners (all ages, races/ ethnicities, genders, income levels, and other facets of identity) are prepared for college and careers. Emphasis is placed on access as well as outcomes. Access is critical, but success is more than giving students a chance. The expectation is that all learners will achieve outcomes that demonstrate their readiness for college and careers.

Career Clusters are groups of occupations and industries that have in common a set of foundational knowledge and skills (see Appendix A).

Career Pathways are multi-phase programs of academic and career and technical education (CTE) that prepare students for a full range of postsecondary and employment options (see Appendix B).

Programs of Study are sequences of academic and CTE courses that incorporate a non-duplicative progression of secondary and adult education as well as postsecondary education elements that lead to college- and industry-recognized credentials and employment (see Appendix B).

Bridge Courses and Other Transition Programs provide an entry point for students, often adults, by aligning and sequencing broad (cluster-level) knowledge and skills with college and career readiness programs (e.g., adult and developmental education are often integrated) to prepare students to matriculate into college-level coursework (see Appendix C).

Illinois’ approach provides multiple pathways to help students envision their future, with Pathways to Results (PTR) providing a systematic process to facilitate implementation of these pathways through thoughtful experimentation and careful evaluation of solutions that are designed to lead to equitable outcomes and sustained improvements.

PTR uses data-driven methods rooted in participatory action research and developmental evaluation. It uses data to ensure perceived problems are real and worthy of scarce resources that can help improve student outcomes and program, institutional and system performance.

PTR taps the knowledge and diverse perspectives of team members who share a commitment to developing solutions that can be sustained and extended to other pathways.

Once begun, the cycle of continuous improvement that is integral to PTR never ends.

Why Equity?

Access to education and opportunity to succeed is important to every learner. Whereas access, equity and opportunity are the right places to start, successful outcomes are the necessary end-goal. Without student success, the educational system is not working equitably or effectively.

PTR is concerned with outcomes and equity for all students for many reasons. Despite the best intentions to create positive change, disparities in outcomes continue to persist for underserved student populations. At nearly all points in the educational pipeline, racial and ethnic minorities, low income students, students with disabilities, immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL), and other underserved groups are not achieving the same levels of success as their non-minority and higher income counterparts. For these underrepresented students, the educational system is not delivering on its promise.

Student demographics are changing. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that no single racial or ethnic group will constitute more than 50% of the population by 2050. Such dramatic changes require new teaching strategies that address the many different ways of learning and knowing of diverse learners, including giving them the opportunity to interact and learn from one another. By sharing perspectives, students gain knowledge and interest in the world around them and in understanding how society benefits from an educated populace. Education in the U.S. has long been understood as an opportunity equalizer, a function of the 'American Dream.' If this dream is to persist, students from all backgrounds must not only gain access and opportunity to learn, but achieve their dreams.

Institutions often focus without success on so-called "deficits" (e.g. poor motivation or underpreparedness) among minority populations as the primary source of achievement gaps. Historically underrepresented student groups, including students of color and low-income, are often the recipients of unequal educational options and resources. To address this serious concern, PTR's focus on equity demands that institutions and practitioners use data to uncover barriers and challenges in the educational process for diverse learners and implement improvements that ensure students attain equitable outcomes, even from unequal starting points. To address equity issues in student transitions and pathways, the PTR process has drawn ideas from the work of the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California (USC). Their Equity Scorecard™ process is designed to shift thinking from blaming students to an institutional responsibility. That is, looking at how educational practices impact student outcomes.

This approach involves practitioners in analyzing data and finding clues to improve practices that, in turn, improve outcomes. PTR draws lessons from the groundbreaking work of Estela Bensimon and Alicia Dowd, director and co-director of CUE and faculty at USC, and their team of talented researchers. PTR has benefited from CUE's use of critical participatory action research, its method of identifying problems of practice, and its engagement of practitioners in problem solving.

The PTR Methodology

Engagement and Commitment – Partners and team members collaborate to focus on critical problems that need to be addressed to improve student outcomes and enhance pathways. Analysis of existing data on student outcomes and pathways performance feed into initial decisions about the PTR project's focus.

Outcomes and Equity Assessment – Teams use student-level data to examine outcomes and identify gaps in results between racial, ethnic, low income, and other groups. Using these data, teams identify areas where outcomes are especially successful and areas where short- and long-term improvements are needed.

Process and Practice Assessment – Teams analyze core practices and processes (e.g., advising, teaching, learning assessment) that support the movement of students along a pathway to attain successful outcomes. Teams probe existing practices and major processes to understand how they impact student outcomes, to identify why desired results are not being produced, and to highlight results that demonstrate exemplary performance.

Process Improvement and Evaluation – Teams reach consensus on improvement solutions, develop implementation plans, and evaluation methods to assess student outcomes and improve pathway performance over time.

Review and Reflection – Team members, individually and collectively, review and reflect on lessons learned throughout the PTR process. The team develops a plan to ensure that solutions are sustained and determines the feasibility of scaling up the PTR process to other pathways. Scaling can also happen in other areas of the institution, the partnership, and the state.



Transforming Systems to Achieve Equitable Outcomes

Engagement and Commitment

This process establishes the foundation for the PTR project. It begins by engaging leaders in a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis and by using these results to involve key organizations, partners and practitioners in planning and implementing the PTR process. During this process the initial problem statement is identified, and an action plan is created to guide PTR and, after working through subsequent processes, identifying sustainable solutions and enhancing student outcomes.

Members of two groups are selected during this process: a) a partnership is formed that represents a broad coalition of partners and stakeholders who give guidance and support to the overall PTR process and the pathway(s) to which this work applies; and b) a PTR team is convened with members responsible for the day-to-day work of PTR. Thoughtful dialogue among members of the partnership and PTR team provides the basis for development of the initial problem statement and the first part of the PTR Charter.

The three steps associated with Engagement and Commitment are:

1. Engage leaders and form the partnership.
2. Gather input from the partnership.
3. Identify and convene the team.

Outcomes and Equity Assessment

During the Outcomes and Equity Assessment process, PTR teams identify, select, and analyze student outcomes data disaggregated by student sub-groups. An important goal is to facilitate deep understanding among PTR team members of how diverse student groups perform on key outcomes. Where gaps in academic performance and achievement are identified, where inequitable outcomes are documented, the overall PTR process seeks to rectify these gaps through the collective work of the PTR team, with support of the leadership of the larger partnership.

Based on the PTR team's collective understanding of what equitable student outcomes mean for the selected pathways and programs of study where data are analyzed. PTR team members consider how and why student outcomes differ by group, and they contemplate how their shared understanding can improve programs. Institutional researchers, team members and others engaged in the research on equity and outcomes participate in facilitated dialogue to uncover equity gaps that set the stage for other PTR processes.

The three steps associated with Outcomes and Equity Assessment are:

1. Select outcomes data that have the potential to reveal gaps between student sub-groups. All team members participate in two facilitated activities to a) identify and select outcomes data to collect, and b) define and develop a shared understanding of equity.
2. Secondary and postsecondary institutional research staff collect and share the data with team members.
3. Review and interpret disaggregated student outcomes data from an equity perspective.

Process and Practice Assessment

This process gives teams a deeper understanding of practices that influence major processes and also identifies specific components that, when modified, improve student outcomes. Understanding how existing processes influence student outcomes is necessary to improve performance. PTR focuses on changing processes to support student success rather than blaming students for their lack of success. Process assessment is a means by which "deficit thinking" that often characterizes discussions of student outcomes inequities is overcome. In this process, teams move from the idea that "if we had better students, we would have better outcomes," to the idea that "if we create better processes, our students will demonstrate better outcomes."

The PTR team seeks to understand how major processes impact student outcomes and contribute to the identified problems. A detailed understanding of major processes and a list of potential factors contributing to the identified problems is created. Those contributing factors are further analyzed to determine underlying reasons or root causes. Once major processes have been defined, the team engages individuals who will be responsible for implementing recommended solutions. Involvement of these individuals, sometimes called "process owners", helps to build buy-in that is needed for long-term, systemic change.

The three steps associated with Process and Practice Assessment are:

1. Identify and describe practices and major functional processes that support student progress along the pathway.
2. Describe the purposes, practices, and detailed steps relevant to the identified major processes.
3. Confirm the potential factors that contribute to student outcomes gaps.

Process Improvement and Evaluation

The process builds on the detailed understanding of processes identified and developed during the previous module, particularly focusing on how processes can be modified to improve student outcomes and equity. Whereas the Process Assessment module is focused on the "whys" of equity and outcomes, this module is focused on the "what" of process changes, and the "how" of process implementation.

The Process Improvement module develops solutions to the problems the PTR team identified and confirmed in earlier processes. These solutions are continuously evaluated to determine whether they support the desired outcomes, taking into consideration factors such as institutional support, cost, and feasibility to implement. Using developmental evaluation, a plan is drafted to track implementation of process improvement and measure program results and student outcomes. Teams set the stage for thinking about future improvements.

The four steps associated with Process Improvement and Evaluation are:

1. Identify solutions and reach consensus on their implementation.
2. Develop an implementation plan for each proposed solution.
3. Develop an evaluation plan that includes measures and prepares team members to collect and analyze data.
4. Implement the solutions and begin to analyze results.

Review and Reflection

Individuals engaged in PTR are continuously learning as they review and reflect on what is happening through the PTR process. PTR teams are also encouraged to engage in dedicated group review and reflection process to sustain solutions and identify benefits of the PTR process that extend to other pathways, other areas of the institution, the partnership, and possibly also the state. An important part of this process involves the engagement of PTR team members and partners in activities that encourage shared learning. The process of reflection begins at with each team member completing personal and group reflections that illustrate lessons learned. PTR teams can use questionnaires, focus groups, and other methods to solicit feedback that informs sustainability and scaling.

This process concludes with individuals sharing their personal reflections and the group creating a collective, team reflection on shared learning experiences. Other pathways and programs of study that can benefit from the PTR process are identified and support for pursuing them is encouraged from key organizations and partners.

The three steps associated with Review and Reflection are:

1. Completion of an individual reflection and questionnaire or other data collection tool on the PTR process.
2. Creation of a group reflection on sustaining solutions and extending (scaling) the work of PTR to other pathways.
3. Creation of a shared understanding of what the PTR process has accomplished to improve pathways and enhance student equity and outcomes.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the most salient aspects of the individual and group review and reflection process?
2. How does the PTR process influence the partnership?
3. How does the PTR process improve student outcomes and equity?

How the Modules are Organized

Each module is organized with the same sections. Each begins with an overview of the process and a description of the process' purpose and goals. A brief summary of how the process focuses on equity, outcomes, and outputs follows. Next, the modules present a very brief description of each step that occurs in the process and who should be involved in related activities. The steps are then discussed in fuller detail, followed by reflection questions.

Team leaders are encouraged to use the reflection questions to enhance the learning of the team members during and after each process. The modules conclude with references and resources that team leaders and members may want to explore to learn more about how to implement the PTR process. These resources are not endorsed by OCCRL, but may provide additional guidance and examples for each process. At the end of each module is a set of appendix items that present vignettes of actual team experiences, meeting agendas, templates and tools, and more.

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Innovative Practices

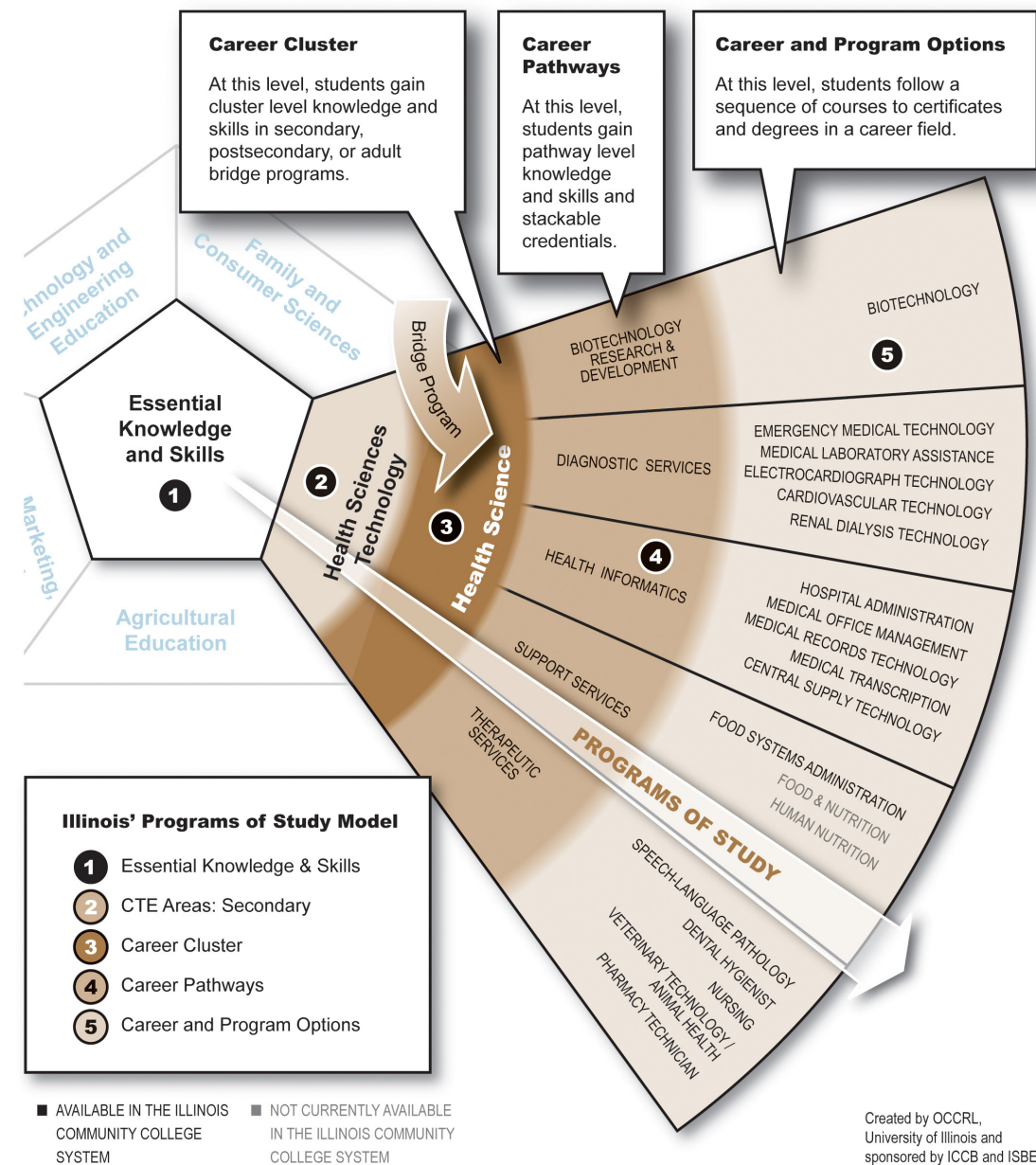
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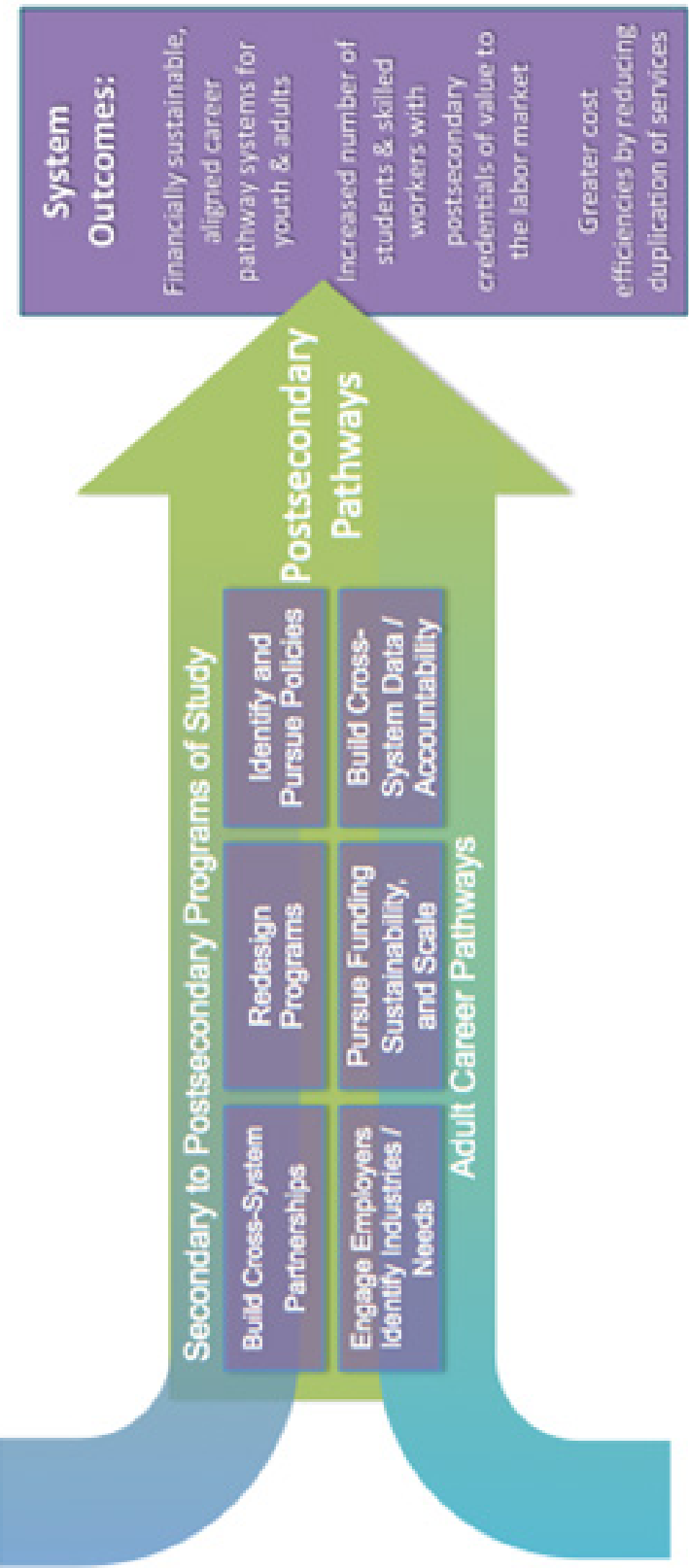
Appendix A
Career Clusters



Appendix B Health Science Cluster



Appendix C Bridge Graphic



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