



Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce

Advancing Equity, Strengthening Pathways, and Building Illinois' Healthcare Workforce

An evaluation of the Pipeline for the
Advancement of the Healthcare
Workforce (PATH) Program



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Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce Program (PATH)

Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

Context

The Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce Program (PATH) is a statewide Illinois initiative designed to address the critical shortage of healthcare professionals. The Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) commissioned the Office of Community College Research & Leadership (OCCRL) to conduct a developmental program evaluation of the PATH Program's goals during the 2025-2026 fiscal year:

- Understand how the PATH program is functioning in practice, whether it is meeting its stated goals, and how it is impacting students and the healthcare workforce.
- Explore the experiences and perspectives of adult learners participating in CTE programs at Illinois community colleges, specifically those enrolled in the PATH program.
- Identify key implementation practices, outcomes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in engaging adult learners.

The key questions this evaluation sought to answer include the following:

- To what extent is the PATH program achieving its intended outcomes and overall impact on participants and targeted workforce pathways?
 - To what extent is the PATH program achieving equitable outcomes for priority populations and contributing to workforce diversification?
- How are PATH program funding and implementation practices being utilized across institutions?
- How do students experience and navigate the PATH program, and to what extent are supports accessible, equitable, and responsive to their needs?

Qualitative data collected through focus group interviews, program documents, interviews with ICCB staff, and student success stories were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes. Quantitative data collected through a Qualtrics online survey administered via individual college PATH program offices attracted additional participants. Together, these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of program implementation, participant needs, and perceived impacts, allowing for a robust and well-rounded assessment of the PATH initiative. Limitations to this study include small participation rates, biased responses from current PATH program participants, and a lack of perspectives from non-completers.

Findings

All Illinois community colleges participate in and receive PATH program funding, which has created a supported workforce pathway into healthcare for populations that often face barriers to entering and completing postsecondary education. The PATH program is effective in advancing equitable outcomes by addressing financial and non-academic barriers, enabling a more diverse group of students to enroll, persist, and complete healthcare programs. Evidence points to improved student retention, completion, and confidence, supported by financial aid and wraparound services such as coaching and accessible support offices. The program has also contributed to workforce diversification through increased enrollment in critical healthcare fields, the development of career pathways, and partnerships that respond to regional workforce needs. Overall, participants reported positive experiences and meaningful support.

Despite these successes, funding instability presents a significant challenge. Reductions in funding have led some colleges to scale back direct wraparound supports (e.g., transportation,

childcare, basic needs assistance) in favor of scholarships, resulting in student frustration and unmet needs. The program's reliance on time-limited or uncertain funding constrains long-term planning and sustainability. Additionally, gaps in outreach and communication may limit awareness of PATH programs among eligible students, particularly those from underserved backgrounds. While workforce partnerships are a core strength, their implementation is uneven across colleges due to differences in capacity and resources. Finally, limited formal systems for gathering and using feedback, along with inconsistent opportunities for cross-institution collaboration, hinder continuous improvement.

Conclusion

Overall, the PATH program demonstrates strong impact in promoting equitable access to healthcare education and strengthening the workforce pipeline; however, its long-term success depends on sustained investment. Continued and increased funding is essential to maintain core supports, expand partnerships, improve outreach, and support ongoing program improvement. Without stable and flexible funding, the program's ability to sustain and scale its impact will be limited.

Acknowledgment

The evaluation team would like to thank all participants who contributed their time, experiences, and perspectives to this evaluation. Their insights were essential to understanding the program's implementation and outcomes. To protect confidentiality, individuals are not identified by name, but their perspectives greatly informed the findings presented in this report.

Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce Program (PATH)

Evaluation Report

Program Overview

The Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce Program (PATH) is a statewide Illinois initiative designed to address the critical shortage of healthcare professionals. Supported by a \$60 million investment over three fiscal years, the PATH program strengthens and expands nursing and priority healthcare pathways by helping individuals earn the credentials and degrees needed for career advancement. Through targeted support for students and institutions, the PATH program works to remove barriers to entry and persistence in healthcare programs, building a stronger, more diverse, and more locally rooted healthcare workforce for Illinois.

Program Goal

The primary goal of the PATH program is to increase healthcare program completions by 15% (approximately 15,000 additional completions) in the first year of funding (FY2023) and to sustain this increase through FY2027.

Target Populations

PATH program funding is designed to support individuals who will make the greatest impact on building and sustaining the healthcare workforce in Illinois, including:

- Incumbent workers seeking advancement or new credentials
- New and entering students on a nursing or healthcare pathway who have demonstrated need and intend to continue working in Illinois
- Low-income, first-generation, and minority students who face systemic barriers to entering and completing healthcare programs

Program Strategies

The PATH program supports both credit and noncredit programs and encourages community colleges to implement strategies tailored to local needs, employer demands, and workforce gaps. Strategies include:

- *Recruitment and Outreach* – building community rapport, hiring program recruiters, collaborative partnerships to access new talent pools, and additional program on-ramps
- *Work-Based Learning* – internship, pre-apprenticeship, and apprenticeship opportunities
- *Wraparound Support Services* – Student Success Coaches and Navigators, offering academic and non-academic supports- tutoring, childcare, tuition and fee assistance, stipends, transportation, transition services for individuals with disabilities, etc.
- *Partnerships and Collaboration* – With universities to deliver the Bachelor of Science in Nursing, with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to deliver support services or build on-ramps, with employers, coordination and referrals with the local One-Stop Center
- *Customized Training* – Incumbent worker training or customized training, intentional integration of essential employability skills training, modularized training programs

Priority Healthcare Occupations

The Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) establishes PATH program priority occupations based on statewide labor-market demand and reviews them annually using current workforce data. These occupations were first established in the grant's initial year and have remained unchanged due to continued high demand, with future updates pending the Spring review conducted prior to each NOFO release. Current high-need healthcare roles include:

1. Emergency Care Attendant (EMT/Ambulance)
2. Emergency Medical Technician/Paramedic
3. Respiratory Care Therapist
4. Registered Nurse (RN)
5. Perioperative/Operating Room and Surgical Nurse
6. Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurse (LPN/LVN)
7. Nursing Assistant/Patient Care Assistant

Evaluation Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this PATH program evaluation is to assess the quality, effectiveness, and overall success of the initiative in creating, supporting, and expanding opportunities for individuals pursuing nursing and identified priority healthcare pathways. This evaluation examines how well the program's strategies and supports meet the needs of targeted populations and contribute to workforce development outcomes. The resulting evaluation report informs future program design, strengthens technical assistance to colleges, and guides continuous improvement in PATH program implementation. In addition, the findings will provide state leaders, institutions, and other key stakeholders with evidence of the program's impact and areas for ongoing enhancement.

This one-year evaluation hopes to address the following goals:

- Understand how the PATH program is functioning in practice, whether it is meeting its stated goals, and how it is impacting students and the healthcare workforce.
- Explore the experiences and perspectives of adult learners participating in CTE programs at Illinois community colleges, specifically those enrolled in the PATH program.
- Identify key implementation practices, outcomes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in engaging adult learners.

Key Evaluation Questions:

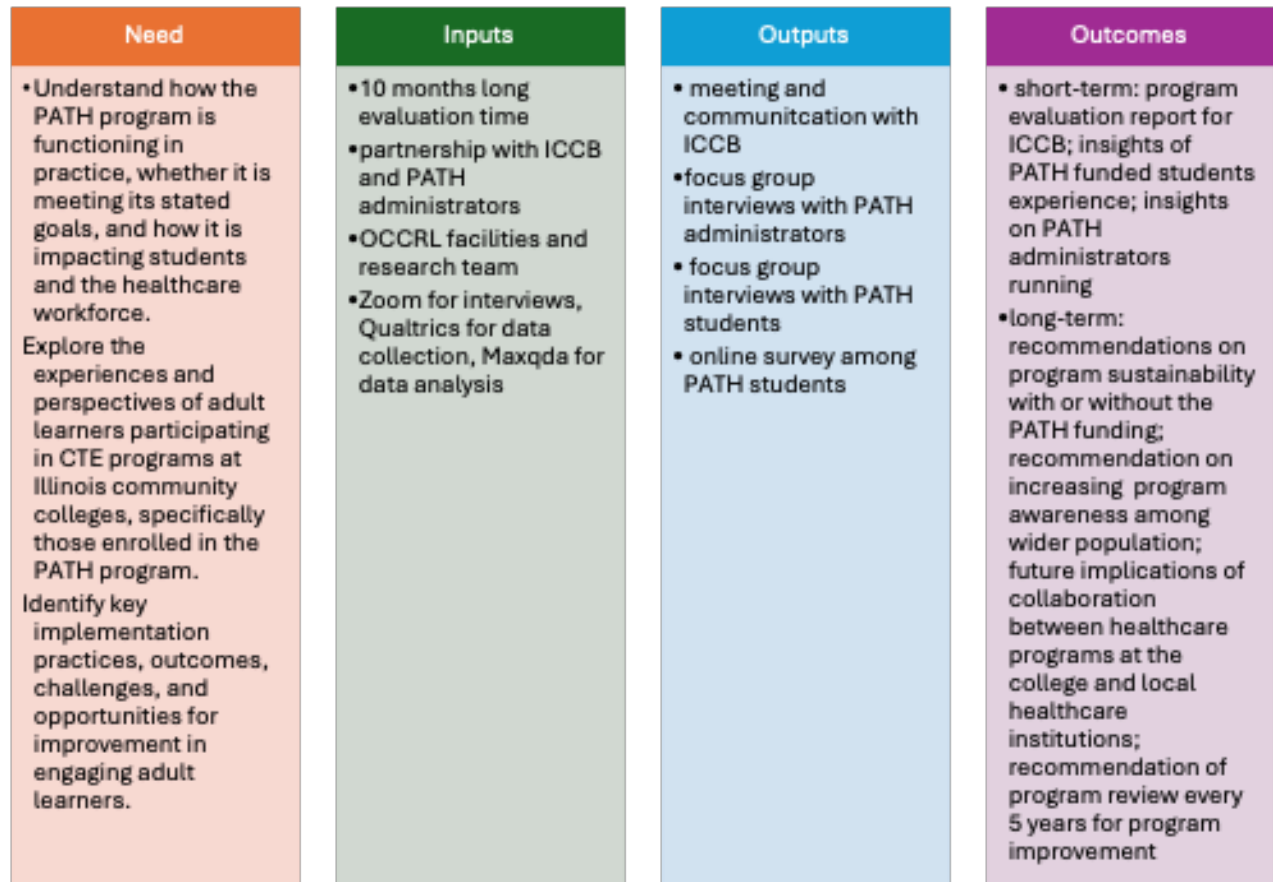
- To what extent is the PATH program achieving its intended outcomes and overall impact on participants and targeted workforce pathways?
 - To what extent is the PATH program achieving equitable outcomes for priority populations and contributing to workforce diversification?
- How are PATH program funding and implementation practices being utilized across institutions?
- How do students experience and navigate the PATH program, and to what extent are supports accessible, equitable, and responsive to their needs?

Evaluation Design

Because this evaluation is happening while the program is running, it is a developmental evaluation. After speaking with the administrators of the PATH program, we found that a mixed-

methods approach was effective for collecting the data needed to answer the evaluation questions (see the logic model below). This design made it possible to collect quantitative data and simultaneously explore deeper conversations with participants using qualitative data (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). In interpreting the results, we have integrated quantitative and qualitative data analysis to identify areas of alignment and areas of contradictory results. Gathering information through both quantitative and qualitative approaches can serve to confirm and cross-validate the accuracy of the data.

Figure 1
PATH Program Evaluation Plan Logic Model



PATH Program Evaluation Alignment

The following table aligns the goals of this PATH Program Evaluation with the corresponding evaluation questions and data collection methods.

PATH Program Goals	Evaluation Question	Data Collection Method/Indicators of Impact
Understand how the PATH program is functioning in practice, whether it is meeting its stated goals, and how it is impacting students and the healthcare workforce.	1. To what extent is the PATH program achieving its intended outcomes and overall impact on participants and targeted workforce pathways? a. To what extent is the PATH program achieving equitable outcomes for priority populations and contributing to workforce diversification?	• Focus group interviews with PATH program administrators • Focus group interviews with PATH program students • ICCB Data
Identify key implementation practices, outcomes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in engaging adult learners.	2. How are PATH program funding and implementation practices being utilized across institutions?	• Focus group interviews with PATH program administrators • Focus group interviews with PATH program students • ICCB Final Closeout Reports
Explore the experiences and perspectives of adult learners participating in CTE programs at Illinois community colleges, specifically those enrolled in the PATH program. Identify key implementation practices, outcomes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in engaging adult learners.	3. How do students experience and navigate the PATH program, and to what extent are supports accessible, equitable, and responsive to their needs?	• Focus group interviews with PATH program students • Survey among PATH program students and alumni

Data Collection Methods

The evaluation employed a mixed methods approach that incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data collection. Focus groups were conducted to capture in-depth perspectives on participants' experiences with the PATH program, the support they received, and the barriers they encountered. Participant recruitment was in collaboration with ICCB and participating community colleges; see *Appendix A* for a list of participating institutions.

We first conducted focus groups with PATH program administrators to understand PATH from their perspective. After obtaining contact information for the PATH program administering staff at each participating college, emails were sent to invite them to focus groups with date and time options to meet with a member of the evaluation team. Follow-up reminders were also sent. The qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured focus group interviews. Overall, 5 focus groups were conducted with 17 staff members. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the evaluation team to ensure confidentiality and validity.

Next, we worked to recruit PATH program students to interview. Study recruitment flyers (see *Appendix B*) with information about the study were sent to PATH program students and program alums through PATH program administrators at each institution. Recruitment emails were sent on November 3, 2025, and several follow-up reminders were sent thereafter. Participants had the opportunity to sign up for available dates and times or contact the evaluation team to be scheduled for other times. There was only one participant inclusion criterion—to be a student or alum of the PATH program at one of the Illinois community colleges. A total of four focus groups were conducted with 11 students.

Last, an online survey was developed and administered to gather broader input from a larger sample of stakeholders. Participants were recruited through communication via individual college offices that administer the PATH program. Again, the only criterion for participant inclusion was to be a student or alumnus of the PATH-funded program at one of the Illinois community colleges. Survey responses were collected using Qualtrics, and a total of 194 responses were gathered. The majority of students surveyed were of traditional ages (18-24 years old), white, continuing students, currently in progress in their program of study, enrolled in Nursing, and first-generation. The figures below outline the demographic and population variables of surveyed students.

Figure 2

Participants age range

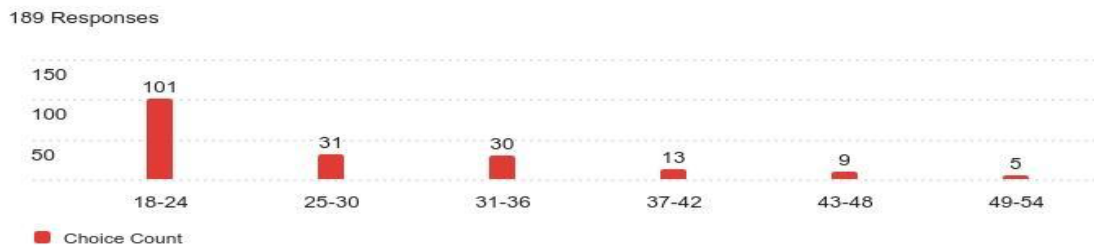


Figure 3
Participants' race/ethnicity

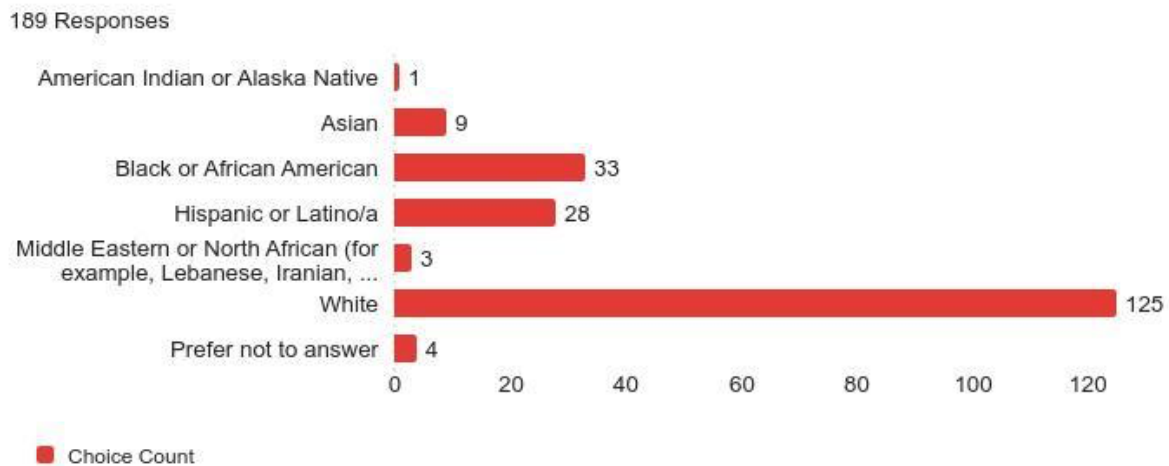


Figure 4
Participants' program enrollment

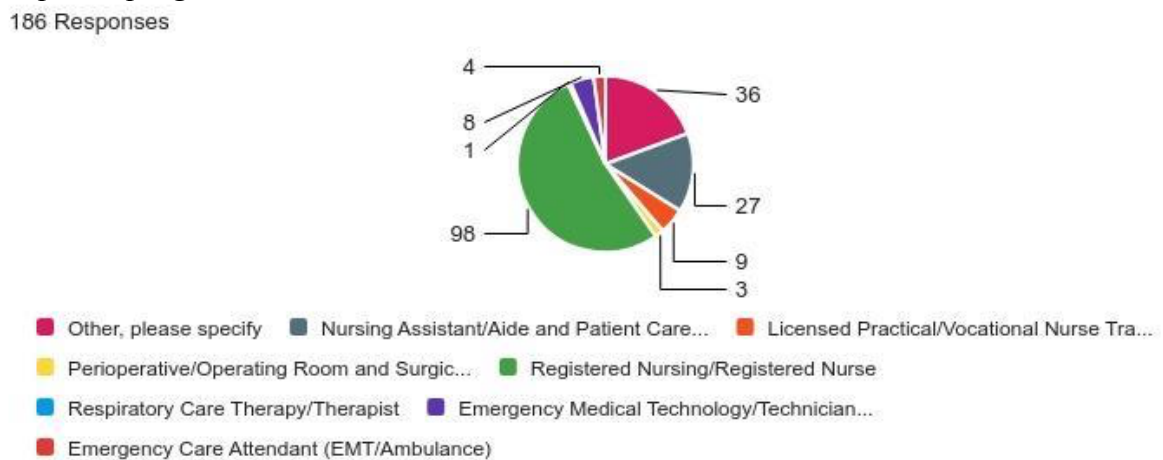


Figure 5
Participants' program enrollment status

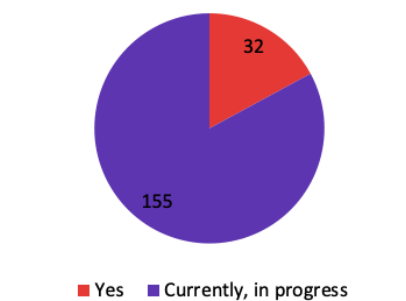
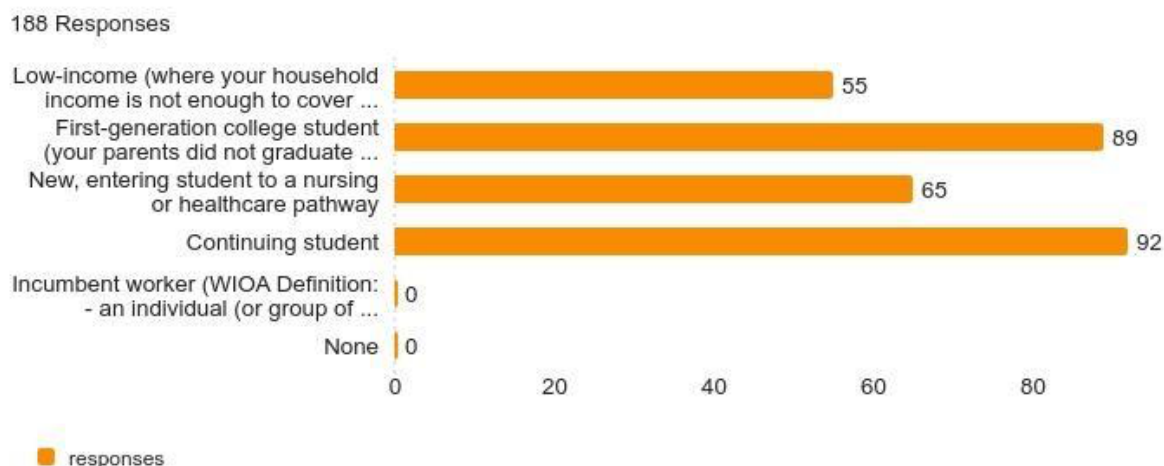


Figure 6
Participants' identity



Together, these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of program implementation, participant needs, and perceived impacts, allowing for a robust and well-rounded assessment of the PATH initiative.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through focus-group interviews, program documents, and student success stories were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes. This involved coding the data in MAXQDA and Taguette to categorize responses and identify commonalities and differences. This process was conducted with a team of four members to ensure that the analysis and inferences had enough discussion and to include diverse perspectives in the final analysis. Data were coded separately, and during team discussions, members agreed on common themes. Analyzing data with team members also enhances its credibility. Quantitative data were analyzed through basic descriptive statistics, and open-ended questions were reviewed for qualitative analysis.

Figure 7
Timeline of Evaluation Activities

Month/Year	Milestone	Responsible party
August 2025	Worked on the IRB application Focus group protocols developed Online survey development	Evaluation team
August 2025	IRB approval received	Evaluation team
October-December 2025	Recruited PATH Program Administrators for focus groups Recruited students for PATH program survey Started literature review	Evaluation team and External Evaluator/Moderator

	Conducted pilot testing of the survey Conducted both PATH program Administrator and Student Focus Groups	
January/February 2026	Data analysis of focus groups and surveys Started evaluation report	Evaluation team
April/May 2026	Preliminary findings and report presentation	Evaluation team
May/June 2026	Meet with ICCB to discuss findings and present the final evaluation report.	Evaluation team

The next section presents the evaluation questions posed as well as the findings.

Evaluation Findings

Evaluation Question 1: A) To what extent is the PATH program achieving its intended outcomes and overall impact on participants and targeted workforce pathways? **B)** To what extent is the PATH program achieving equitable outcomes for priority populations and contributing to workforce diversification?

The PATH program is highly effective in achieving equitable outcomes for its priority populations by directly addressing financial barriers and providing crucial support, thereby enabling a more diverse range of individuals to enter and advance in the healthcare workforce.

Targeted Demographics. The program explicitly aims to support "low-income, first-generation, and minoritized students." Whether in the survey (see Table 5 above), focus groups, or in student success stories, students self-identified in many of these categories. In one focus group, Student M directly affirmed that she fits "into all three of those" categories and that the program "definitely got their target audience." Additionally, many interviewees acknowledged that they were incumbent workers and/or looking to change careers.

Addressing Financial Barriers. One of the PATH program's main strategies is to assist students financially, but there is variation across institutions in how the money is used. From an administrator's standpoint, Administrator A noted that PATH provides "significant financial support to engage students in the healthcare profession." Additionally, Administrator K emphasized that for non-financial-aid-eligible programs such as basic nursing assisting and EMT, the PATH program pays fees and books, making these programs accessible to students who would not otherwise afford them. Regarding students, Student TV, whose husband was unemployed, found the financial support "a huge help for our family during this time." Student M considered dropping her program due to tuition costs, but was able to continue thanks to the PATH program's assistance, highlighting its role in retaining students who might otherwise be excluded.

Support for Adult Learners/Non-Traditional Students. The PATH program also appears to be particularly responsive to older, non-traditional students who often face unique challenges. Student TJ, who identified as an adult learner, observed that the demographics of students seeking assistance at the PATH-affiliated CASH office "has definitely shifted older" compared to the general student body, suggesting it serves those who "don't have a whole lot of safety net at home." Administrator L shared powerful success stories of single mothers and individuals taking on foster children, whose ability to pursue healthcare careers was directly enabled by PATH program's financial and wraparound support.

The program's contribution to workforce diversification is evident through increased enrollment in critical healthcare programs, the creation of career advancement pathways, and the fostering of innovative partnerships to meet regional healthcare demands.

Increasing Access to Healthcare Programs. The PATH program directly contributes to workforce diversification by enabling individuals from priority populations to enter various healthcare fields. As discussed earlier, the PATH program supports a wide range of healthcare occupations, including nursing (CNA, LPN, RN), respiratory therapy, phlebotomy, and EMT, helping address shortages across these roles. Administrator D noted a 75% increase in enrollment in their BNA/CNA program due to the PATH program, directly helping students access these entry-level healthcare roles. Additionally, the PATH program continues to expand as additional priority occupations are identified.

Creating Pathways for Advancement. The PATH program supports students in progressing through healthcare education, from certificates to degrees. Kaskaskia's LPN to RN bridge program, funded by the PATH program, provides a "clean pathway" for LPNs to become RNs in one year, recognizing prior education and accelerating career advancement. This is a direct mechanism for upskilling and diversifying the higher-level healthcare workforce. Administrator A mentioned helping students move to "elevated courses – chemistry and math to matriculate into LPN track."

Innovative Program Development. The mission and philosophy of the PATH program have spurred colleges to develop new programs and partnerships that contribute to workforce needs. Elgin Community College launched a new respiratory care program with PATH program funds, addressing a "need in the area, in the Elgin area, and across the state of Illinois." Kaskaskia developed preceptorships with local healthcare organizations for nursing students, connecting them directly to future employers and easing their transition into the workforce. Administrator L also dreams of a dental hygiene program, recognizing a significant regional shortage.

Addressing Rural Shortages. For rural institutions such as Kaskaskia and Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, the PATH program is crucial to developing and sustaining local healthcare talent. Administrator K noted that IECC is a "rural district" and the PATH program helps them serve their community. Administrator L highlighted the desperate need for respiratory therapists in southern Illinois and the efforts to establish a satellite campus with another community college to address this.

PATH Program's Intended Outcomes

The ICCB is very intentional in aligning its program needs with labor market demand. All Illinois community colleges participate and receive PATH program funding. PATH program resources connect students to real workforce experiences and employers, strengthening the healthcare talent pipeline. For that reason, it has met and exceeded its goal of 15,000 completions in the first year. From there, the agreed-upon goal was to not fall below 15,000 completions in healthcare programs in following years. Per ICCB, "Colleges exceeded the 15% growth in completions, boasting 15,442 completers in its second year, inclusive of both credit and noncredit programs."

PATH Grant Target and Actual Completions			
Target	Year One (FY2023)	Year Two (FY2024)	Year Three (FY2025)
15,000	15,093	15,442	16,075

Source: ICCB

Overall Impact

The overall impact of the PATH program appears to be the creation of a supported workforce pathway into healthcare for populations that often face barriers to entering and completing postsecondary education. The PATH program is doing more than simply funding training. It has acknowledged and built a comprehensive ecosystem of support, access, and workforce alignment.

The PATH program appears to lower structural barriers (e.g., financial, access) to healthcare education, especially for adult learners, working students, student parents, and historically underrepresented groups. Over the last three years, 46,610 students have completed a healthcare program, and over 36,000 have received direct support. Following is the total number of unduplicated participants served for each of the past three years:

Year	No. of students directly receiving funding	No. of Enrolled Students
FY2023	11,264	23,201
FY2024	12,727	25,055
FY2025	12,154	29,501

Source: ICCB

Evaluation Question 2: How are PATH program funding and implementation practices being utilized across institutions?

PATH Program Funding Utilization

Funds for the PATH program, allocated through the Illinois FY2023 budget, depend on annual approval by the General Assembly. PATH program funds are distributed through ICCB to community colleges, each of which signs a grant agreement. Allocations are based on a \$100,000 base plus an average of healthcare program completers over three years, with priority and high-need programs weighted more. Non-credit completers in PATH-approved CIP codes are included, with counts averaged over three years. PATH programs are monitored via quarterly reports, technical assistance, and meetings. Reports are due 30 days after each quarter, reviewed, and followed up on as needed. To evaluate success, districts must meet a performance target for completions, set by ICCB at 15% growth, and institutions must include targets and enrollments in their plans. Most participating colleges utilize all allocated funds for the PATH program. The primary expenses, using FY25 closeout reports, include staffing (salaries and benefits) and supplies, as detailed in close-out reports submitted to ICCB. The table below highlights program expense averages by budget category inclusive of all the community colleges participating. On average, from the 27 community colleges plus Illinois Eastern Community Colleges and City Colleges of Chicago districts, PATH programs spent 97.59% of funds disbursed.

Program Expenses by Budget Category	Average (percentage)
Contractual Services	50.15%
Consultant (Professional Services)	6.45%
Construction	3.44%
Direct Admin Costs	6.50%
Equipment	45.24%
Fringe Benefits	87.82%
Grant Exclusive	35.31%
Indirect/General Admin	69.69%
Miscellaneous/Other	62.89%
Occupancy (Rent/Utilities)	2.27%
Personnel Services (Salaries and Wages)	90.97%
Supplies	127.37%
Telecommunications	0.00%
Training and Education	24.73%
Travel	55.04%
Total Expenditures	97.59%

Implementation Practices

Data suggests the PATH program improves student retention, completion, and confidence. The additional resources and flexibility supported by PATH funding enhance students' ability to persist and complete their programs, as noted by Administrator K. Administrator Al also linked PATH support to improved NCLEX pass rates, explaining that

while faculty efforts were critical, investments such as expanded lab access “came together in a really positive way,” contributing to several consecutive semesters of strong outcomes. Additionally, by addressing both academic and non-academic barriers, the PATH program contributes to students’ sense of belonging and confidence on campus. Community colleges’ diversified strategies, including student-tailored consultations, accessible walk-in office services, and collaborative work with community partners, served as key implementation practices. See *Appendix C* for the PATH program logic model.

Recruitment and Outreach. Community colleges used a variety of strategies in program recruitment and outreach. Academic and success coaches are reported to be involved with program outreach by attending career fairs, high schools, and healthcare organizations. Also, visiting classrooms during their orientation extended opportunities for students to learn about the program and consider continuing into healthcare programs or planning continuing education. The key is to establish communication first, then follow up during office visits with questions. While some colleges offer summer camps specifically for incumbent workers, these events were also well attended by high school students before they started college. Data from interviews with students also revealed that the program successfully attracted underserved students/priority student populations.

Work-Based Learning. While participating colleges did mention specific healthcare apprenticeships (most often CNA programs), these were typically described as pilots, underutilized, or still in development rather than fully established pathways. In contrast, clinicals and practicums were consistently cited as the primary, more established form of work-based learning, highlighting ongoing challenges in building and sustaining formal apprenticeship models in healthcare.

Creating opportunities for internship and apprenticeship programs for students was a conversation that divided colleges into those engaging with successful program operations and those not reaching their targets with local healthcare institutions. The first group of colleges partnered with local hospitals to place their students into hospital apprenticeship programs. Also, some colleges already had workforce development apprenticeships with certified nursing assistant (CNA) programs to offer for their healthcare students in the PATH program. These collaborations resulted in students finding their future employment. For example, College of Dupage, located in the suburbs of Chicago, has been able to establish partnerships with major local healthcare providers such as Northwestern Medicine. At the same time, college partnerships with local healthcare facilities also depend on the size and role the institution plays in the region. For instance, a participant described a challenge in creating apprenticeships due to a competing program in the community run by a dominant healthcare provider, which enables them to instruct people internally rather than collaborating with community colleges. Another institution explained how its rural location created obstacles for students attempting to secure required clinical hours due to limited local healthcare infrastructure, requiring students to travel to other cities for clinical training. Although institutions understand the need and benefits of apprenticeship and training for students in the program, they also need more system-wide legislative changes to support systems for healthcare professionals’ training.

Wraparound Support Services. Both data, collected through focus group interviews with students and survey responses, aligned with positive student experiences with program services. The PATH program operated in helping students in two ways: 1) financial assistance with tuition and books, and 2) non-financial support that includes diverse student services at each college. Most of the student participants mentioned receiving tuition assistance, funding for

books, and gas cards. The program's funding allocation through targeted tuition assistance and support for books was discussed extensively as a unique opportunity for students who did not qualify for or had exhausted other state or federal funding programs. The use of gas and food cards was also seen as a great help for most working students who can allocate extra time for their studies, compensating for out-of-work hours.

The nature of walk-in offices eases access to services for students and helps tailor support services to individual students' needs. One of the staff positions that emerged to meet students' needs was the success coach role. The PATH program administrator shared that success coaches wear many hats, including student recruitment, tutoring, and offering a list of resources available in the colleges and the community. Overall, wraparound student support services created a systemic approach to supporting students with program benefits and beyond.

Partnerships and Collaboration. Findings from focus group interviews with PATH program administrators demonstrate that colleges consistently worked to establish partnerships with local healthcare organizations. Although the communication process took some time, colleges eventually benefited from transitioning their students to their future employers. These partnerships benefited both sides, helping students overcome commuter barriers to clinical sites, work with unit nurses rather than clinical instructors, and enabling healthcare organizations to be involved in training their future employees. Interview findings suggest that due to the beneficial nature of the collaboration with community healthcare organizations and successful strategies used by college representatives, these initiatives did not involve PATH program funding, but the program goals—“...we didn't really use PATH's money to do it, but we used PATH's mission and philosophy...”

Another finding suggests that community and employer partnerships raise awareness of existing college programs and serve as a bridge to update healthcare organizations about them. Participants also mentioned positive feedback from employers regarding the established partnerships and the ease of hiring workers into their facilities.

Customized Training. Some colleges offer healthcare programs in partnership with local hospitals, which help students gain practical skills on-site. The successful program operation led to direct referral lines from local health providers for people trained in their CNA program to continue with the LPN program at college. Colleges were also able to expand nursing programs by offering LPN-to-RN bridge programs, helping ease the transition and supporting PATH funding for this journey. Some colleges created four-week courses for LPN students with licenses to complete, and upon successful completion, are offered to start a second year of the RN program. One college was able to purchase a new X-ray machine for its radiography program with PATH funding. Flexibility of PATH administrators within the college is a key component of the program's successful operation.

Overall, colleges largely use these funds for staffing, student support, and program needs, with evidence showing improved student retention, completion, and confidence, driven by both financial aid and wraparound services such as coaching and accessible support offices. Recruitment efforts target diverse and underserved populations through outreach events and partnerships, while work-based learning opportunities vary depending on local healthcare collaborations. Strong partnerships with healthcare providers help align training with workforce needs, and flexible, customized training programs—such as CNA-to-nursing pathways—further support student success. However, some institutions face challenges due to regional or systemic limitations.

Evaluation Question 3: How do students experience and navigate the PATH program, and to what extent are supports accessible, equitable, and responsive to their needs?

All participants indicated receiving some support and were generally positive about the PATH program. Administrator A noted that while “PATH looks different at every institution, it’s effective as it addresses local student needs and workforce needs.” Students noted that PATH helped build their confidence, allowed them to remain in their program of study, and had “open door policies.” To understand perspectives not represented among current participants, the evaluation team sought to engage former PATH program participants and non-completers in healthcare programs. Despite these efforts, we were unable to successfully survey or interview these students.

One of the PATH program Administrators noted that students often send them good news emails. Some examples of students’ PATH program experiences include:

- Thank you again for hosting the workshop. It was very informative and has greatly helped me gain a better understanding of the HESI 2A exam. I truly appreciate the time and effort you put into making it both engaging and helpful.
- Good morning [PATH administrator]. I just wanted to let you know that I passed my state exam for CNA. Thank you for all your help. Have a great day,
- Good afternoon, I just wanted to let you know that I got 89 out of 100 on my final exam today and I passed the course with a B. Thank you so much for your help.
- Dear [PATH administrator], Hope this email finds you well. I would like to express my sincere appreciation for all the support and assistance you have provided. Your efforts and guidance throughout this process mean a great deal to me and have truly made a difference.
- Hello, Everything is going good so far. I used all the tips and tricks for the exam and got a higher score. Thank you for your help!! I appreciate it!
- It was so nice catching up with you as well. I’ve made an appointment to meet with Nancy for 10/24. Thank you for answering all my questions and easing my worries about this exam!!
- Thank you so much for your time today. It was such a pleasure to meet you. I am so glad I reached out. I feel a lot better after talking with you and look forward to speaking again! Your kind words and encouragement means so much!

Student responses to the first part of the question were analyzed and categorized across three dimensions: accessibility, equity, and responsiveness to student needs.

Accessible. The process for accessing PATH program funds at Joliet Junior College (JJC) was described as “extremely” easy and “seamless and simple.” Student TJ recounted that after receiving an email about available funds, he responded, set up an appointment, met with staff for about 10 minutes, provided his story, and received approval and funds within a month and three meetings. He also received a gas card and a grocery card at his first meeting. Student M at JJC found the process “extra easy” and “really smooth,” despite never having gone through an aid or grant process before.

At Oakton College, students are notified via email about qualification and can apply through a Google form, which takes “only a couple minutes to fill out.” However, some students,

such as those as Student TV, were initially unaware of the program, suggesting that while access is easy once known, awareness could be improved. Heather, a student, also noted that it's a "shame that it's not going to somebody" if funds are left over due to lack of awareness.

Equitable. As cited in the FY26 program design, the PATH program models the Workforce Equity (now Empowerment) Initiative, a statewide grant program focused on expanding short-term training opportunities for minority students in underinvested communities by providing comprehensive wraparound support and career services...the target populations are expanded to include low-income students, first-generation students, and entry-level incumbent workers. The PATH program adopts the use of career pathways as an overarching strategy to address pain points in the healthcare talent pipeline as well as issues of equity within preparation and employment." Additionally, the PATH program supports other underserved populations such as immigrant students and unhoused students. Administrator D noted that a significant portion of their students (52-57%) are Latinx, many are first-generation, and their success stories often center on these students. Student TJ, a first-generation student mentioned earlier, observed that the demographics of students seeking help at the CASH office (affiliated with PATH) "shifted older" compared to the general student population at JJC, with more people in their 30s and 40s, who often lack a "safety net at home." This suggests the program is reaching a demographic with greater financial needs. Student M, who identifies as low-income, first-generation, and minoritized, affirmed that the program "definitely got their target audience" and has helped her "immensely."

Administrator L shared success stories of students who were single mothers or were fostering multiple children, highlighting how the PATH program's financial support was crucial to their continuing their education. However, Student TV wished the program "could apply to people who are not U.S. citizens," as she was a low-income, first-generation, minoritized international student who received no support. She also mentioned that having a bachelor's degree (even from outside the U.S.) disqualified her from financial aid, a sentiment echoed by Student M regarding FAFSA. This points to potential equity limitations for certain student populations as they often need a Social Security Number (SSN) for clinicals, licensure exams, etc.

Responsive. The program's supports, especially financial assistance, were consistently described as responsive and timely in meeting students' immediate needs. Selected student examples follow.

- Student TJ, after verification, received assistance with an "emergency eye surgery" that cost almost \$5,000 out of pocket, along with gas and grocery cards.
- Student M found the tuition assistance a "huge help" that "really took a lot of weight off my shoulders" and allowed her to continue her program when she was considering dropping out due to cost.
- Student TV, whose husband experienced unemployment, found the tuition and book fee reimbursement a "huge help for our family during this time."
- Beyond direct financial aid, some colleges offer additional support. At JJC, the PATH office provides students with computers and printers, as well as study tips and groups.
- Administrator L highlighted the "success coach" role, which, while not directly providing funds, connects students to a "network of resources" for various needs, including emergency funding, laundry services, and mental health support. This coach often addresses "mental health, mental support, social support" issues that impact academic success.

- Administrator AI noted that their program provides "significant financial support," tutoring, and helps students move into elevated courses.
- Administrator K mentioned that they invest in "college career coaches/specialists" who meet with students for "personal, academic and financial concerns."

However, the decrease in funding has forced some colleges, like Kaskaskia, to transition away from direct "wraparound services" (gas cards, grocery cards, babysitting) to scholarships, which, while still helpful, caused "frustration" among students who were used to the more immediate support. Administrator D also noted the impact of reduced funding on transportation needs and other student support.

Recommendations & Implications

This next section discusses recommendations and implications that emerged from evaluation findings for future PATH program design, implementation, and funding.

The PATH program expands equitable access to healthcare education while strengthening the workforce pipeline by combining financial assistance, wraparound student supports, and strong employer and community partnerships. By addressing academic, financial, and personal barriers simultaneously, the program improves student persistence and career readiness, particularly for adult learners and underserved populations. At the same time, the program fosters cross-institutional and employer collaboration, positioning the PATH program as a promising model for workforce-aligned education that will require sustained investment to continue and expand. Based on these findings, key recommendations emerge, including the need for stable and flexible long-term funding, strengthened outreach and program visibility, deeper workforce partnerships, structured feedback and continuous improvement mechanisms, expanded cross-institutional learning opportunities, and more inclusive eligibility criteria to advance equity further.

Long-term Sustainability through Stable Funding. Across focus groups, students and staff consistently emphasized the importance of ensuring the PATH program's long-term sustainability. While our findings demonstrate that the PATH program delivers meaningful benefits for student persistence, career readiness, and workforce development, its continued success is constrained by reliance on uncertain funding that may be time-limited or subject to shifting policy and budget priorities. A central challenge is sustaining the staffing infrastructure that underpins the PATH program, particularly student success coaches, whose roles are critical to addressing student needs but are often grant-funded and, therefore, vulnerable to cuts. Clarifying and documenting these roles, including their impact on student outcomes, is essential to making the case for institutionalization.

To address this challenge, future efforts should prioritize securing more stable and predictable funding streams while also exploring strategies to institutionalize the PATH program within participating colleges and systems. In addition, students emphasized the importance of expanding funding levels to meet growing student demand and adopting more flexible, student-centered funding models. Allowing institutions to allocate resources based on real-time student needs can enhance program responsiveness and effectiveness.

Outreach, Recruitment, and Program Visibility. Findings from the evaluation indicate that program awareness and information clarity remain key challenges for students in the PATH program. While the PATH program is designed to expand equitable access, limited visibility and unclear communication about eligibility, benefits, and application processes may prevent some students, especially those from underserved backgrounds, from taking advantage of the PATH program. It is also critical to understand the multiple responsibilities that PATH program grant administrators and student success coaches balance that might limit their capacity to fully implement and expand program activities.

To address this, institutions should adopt more strategic and proactive outreach efforts. This includes using multiple communication channels, such as academic advisors, faculty, community-based organizations, and digital platforms, to reach students at different entry points. Clear, accessible messaging about program requirements and benefits is essential to reducing confusion and ensuring that students can make informed decisions.

Workforce and Employment Partnerships. Evaluation findings highlight workforce and employer partnerships as a central strength of the PATH program, while also revealing

uneven implementation across institutions. While some colleges have developed strong partnerships that provide students with access to internships, clinical placements, and clear employment pathways, others face challenges in building and sustaining these relationships due to limited institutional capacity, geographic locations and available regional resources. This disparity is crucial, as it shapes the extent to which students can access meaningful workforce opportunities and, in turn, influences program outcomes across institutions.

To address this gap, future efforts should focus on providing targeted support for institutions with fewer resources to develop and maintain employer partnerships. This could include funding dedicated staff positions, such as workforce partnership coordinators, who focus on building and maintaining relationships with healthcare employers and K-12 systems. Institutions may also benefit from shared or regional partnership models that allow multiple colleges to access existing employer networks rather than developing connections independently. In addition, state-level coordination could help improve employer engagement, facilitate clinical placements, and reduce administrative burden on individual colleges.

Feedback Mechanism and Continuous Improvement. Evaluation findings underscore the importance of incorporating structured feedback and data-driven processes to support ongoing improvement of the PATH program. While participants generally reported positive experiences, there were limited formal mechanisms to consistently capture student and staff feedback and translate those insights into program adjustments.

To strengthen continuous improvement, institutions should establish regular and systematic channels for gathering feedback, such as surveys, focus groups, and advisory committees that include both students, faculty, and staff. These mechanisms can help identify emerging challenges, highlight effective practices, and ensure that program design remains responsive to participants' needs. In addition to collecting feedback, institutions should also prioritize the systematic use of data to inform decision-making, including tracking student outcomes, program participation, and service utilization. Creating clear feedback loops can further enhance transparency, accountability, and overall program effectiveness.

Cross-Institutional Learning and Collaboration. Evaluation findings highlight the value of cross-institutional learning and collaboration in strengthening the implementation of the PATH program. While some opportunities for collaboration (i.e., PATH Roundtable, learning collaboratives) exist, these efforts are often limited in scope and do not consistently provide space for institutions to share experiences, challenges, and strategies. As a result, valuable knowledge and effective practices may remain siloed rather than leveraged across participating colleges. Notably, the focus groups conducted as part of this evaluation demonstrated how structured spaces for dialogue can foster meaningful exchange, as participants actively learned from one another and shared practical insights across institutional contexts.

To improve collaboration across colleges, institutions should establish more regular, structured opportunities, such as regional convenings and forums that bring together faculty and staff from different colleges. These spaces can facilitate the exchange of best practices, support collective problem-solving, and promote more consistent implementation across sites. In addition, developing shared platforms for resources, tools, and data can further enhance knowledge sharing. Creating intentional opportunities for both formal and informal dialogue can help replicate the organic learning observed in focus groups and support continuous improvement at scale.

Advancing Equity through Inclusive Access and Eligibility: Evaluation findings suggest that while the PATH program is designed to advance equity, certain eligibility criteria

and structural constraints may limit access for some populations. Participants noted that restrictions related to citizenship status and prior educational attainment can exclude individuals who could otherwise benefit from the program. At the same time, these constraints may be related to broader federal financial aid policies rather than policies specific to the PATH program itself. Nevertheless these barriers may unintentionally narrow the program's reach and constrain its ability to fully serve underserved and nontraditional student populations.

To improve equitable access, policymakers should consider revisiting eligibility criteria to reduce structural barriers and expand participation. This may include exploring more flexible pathways for non-U.S. citizens and individuals with prior degrees, as well as ensuring that eligibility requirements are clearly communicated and consistently applied across institutions.

Ethical Considerations

All data collected during the evaluation is treated as confidential. Participant identities are anonymized to protect their privacy. Only members of the evaluation team will have access to identifiable information, and data are stored securely using a password-protected Box folder. This evaluation adheres to ethical guidelines established by the UIUC Institutional Review Board (IRB). Researchers have undergone training in research ethics to ensure compliance with ethical standards throughout all stages of the research process.

Limitations and Risks

The following table lists challenges encountered during the evaluation, along with possible impacts and mitigation strategies on the evaluation process.

Potential Challenges	Possible Impact on Evaluation Process	Mitigation Strategies
Small participation rate (survey, interview)	Small participation rate impacts the program evaluation and generalize findings to the whole program population.	Student recruitment for interviews happened through the community colleges that run PATH programs, thus communication was trusted by students. Also some community colleges offered incentives for interview participation raising participation rates. Recruitment for surveys was also communicated by individual community colleges and the survey remained open from December 1-19, 2025, initially with extension until January 12, 2026, giving extra time for students to complete the survey.
Biased responses (interview)	Program students and alumni who may agree and can be reachable firsthand potentially can give biased responses because they had a good program experience. This impacts the assessment pros and cons of the whole program.	The evaluation team allocated the first 5 minutes of the interview to explain the goals of the interview and how their responses impact the evaluation results.
Lack of perspectives from non-completers	Despite efforts to recruit non-completers, this underrepresentation of non-completers limits the comprehensive of the evaluation by overlooking key barriers to persistence.	

PATH Program Evaluation Conclusion

Overall, our evaluation findings show that the PATH program is highly effective. However, despite these strong outcomes, the program's long-term success remains dependent on continued financial investment. Across focus groups, funding emerged as a central concern, as current reliance on state support and time-limited resources creates uncertainty for sustainability and expansion.

To maintain its impact, ongoing and increased funding is essential. Sustained investment is needed not only to preserve core program components, such as financial aid, wraparound supports, and workforce partnerships, but also to strengthen outreach, expand employer connections, support continuous improvement, and ensure equitable access. Without stable and flexible funding, the effectiveness of the PATH program may be difficult to sustain over time.

References:

- Illinois Community College Board. (2026). Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce Program. Accessed here: <https://www.iccb.org/divisions/career-and-tech-education/path/>
- Mertens, D. M., & Wilson, A. T. (2018). *Program evaluation theory and practice: A comprehensive guide*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Appendix A

Participating Institutions across Students and Administrators Focus Groups

Focus Group Participating Institutions
Parkland College
South Suburban College
Waubensee Community College
Richland Community College
College of DuPage
Kaskaskia College
Elgin Community College
Moraine Valley Community College
City College of Chicago
Lake Land College
Lincoln Land Community College
John Wood Community College
Rend Land College
Joliet Junior College
Oakton College

Appendix B

Student Recruitment Flyer



**OFFICE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH & LEADERSHIP**
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY COLLEGES
THROUGH RESEARCH & EVALUATION



Are you a current or former student in the Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce (PATH)?

We need the help of **current** and **former** community college **students** to learn **what is working** (or not working) in Illinois career and technical education (CTE) programs.



FAQs

- 01** Online focus groups
- 02** 1.5 hour maximum meeting time
- 03** Financial incentives available

Recruiting current and former majors in

PRIORITY OCCUPATIONS:

- Emergency Care Attendant (EMT/Ambulance)
- Emergency Medical Technology/Technician (EMT/Paramedic)
- Respiratory Care Therapy/Therapist
- Registered Nursing/Registered Nurse
- Perioperative/Operating Room and Surgical Nurse/Nursing
- Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurse Training
- Nursing Assistant/Aide and Patient Care Assistant/Aide

Registration instructions below

Sign-up for a Fall 2025 focus group slot

Current and former PATH students, we especially want to hear from you! Please consider registering below, so we can learn how to improve this program for current and future students.

To sign-up please visit bit.ly/pathfocus or email

✉

Aidana Sirgebayeva
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scan me

🌐 www.occrllinois.edu

📍 2202 Kirk Drive, MC-672
Champaign, IL 61820

Appendix C

PATH Program Evaluation Logic Model

KELLOGG LOGIC MODEL

PATH is an acronym for Pipeline for the Advancement of the Healthcare Workforce, and is a grant provided by the State of Illinois. Through an investment totaling \$60 million over the last three fiscal years, PATH has provided support for students and programs to overcome the extreme shortages in the healthcare workforce.

