

BRIEF

Maximizing
Access &
Success
for Special
Populations



Supporting Economically Disadvantaged Learners in Career Technical Education

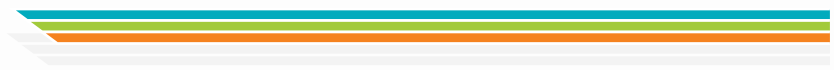
Career Technical Education (CTE) policies and programs have increasingly focused on supporting the needs of historically marginalized learners and closing access and performance gaps among learner groups. Perkins V, the latest iteration of federal CTE legislation known as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, is part of this trend. The law defines nine learner groups as special populations and includes a number of provisions that address expanding access to and supporting success within CTE programs for special populations. This brief will describe strategies for supporting one of these special populations: economically disadvantaged learners.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN PERKINS V

LEARNER GROUPS DEFINED AS SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN PERKINS V:

- Out-of-workforce individuals
- English learners
- Individuals experiencing homelessness
- Individuals with disabilities
- Single parents, including single pregnant women
- Youth who are in/have aged out of the foster care system
- Individuals preparing for careers that are non-traditional for their gender
- Youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty
- Individuals from economically disadvantaged families, ex. low-income youth and adults

CTE educators are developing strategies to support learner groups who, while not special populations under the law, may need additional supports, including migrant and undocumented, LGBTQ+, justice-involved and Tribal learners.



DEFINING ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

Perkins V does not define the term “economically disadvantaged.” States have taken different approaches to identify economically disadvantaged learners in their communities. Common state methods to identify economically disadvantaged learners in K-12 and postsecondary institutions include:

- *Eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL):* FRPL eligibility is a widely used identifier for economic disadvantage. Eligibility can be established through several methods, including electronic direct certification or parent or guardian application. Direct certification is a process through which enrollment records are matched to records for other public assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).¹ Learners identified through direct certification are categorically eligible for free meals.
- *Related special population status:* Economically disadvantaged learners may be identified through their status in another special population group, such as foster youth and former foster youth, youth experiencing homelessness, and/or children of migrant workers. These special populations are often included in eligibility for FRPL, and as a result learners in these groups may be also categorized as economically disadvantaged.²
- *Pell Grant recipients:* Pell Grant receipt is a widely used proxy for postsecondary learners with low-income status because the program awards grants to this demographic of learners, and the data on Pell Grant recipients at each institution is readily accessible.³

One of the eight stated purposes of Perkins V legislation is to increase employment opportunities for populations from economically disadvantaged families, among other learner groups.



STRATEGIES FOR ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

Economically disadvantaged learners have been a long-standing priority of Perkins legislation to increase equitable access to high-quality CTE programs of study and job opportunities and to combat the legacy of “tracking” learners from low-income backgrounds, among other learner groups.⁴

This focus has resulted in a number of effective strategies to support this population. Potential state (🏛️) and local (📍) approaches include:

Focus on ensuring economic mobility 🏛️ 📍

State and local leaders can intentionally ensure that programs offered lead to opportunities that pay a family-sustaining wage to ensure that CTE programs set learners up for economic mobility. This may include providing opportunities to earn credentials of value that equip learners for a strong career trajectory and improve earning potential.⁵

Work-based learning 🏛️ 📍

State and local leaders can consider removing financial barriers to participating in work-based learning opportunities, including access to reliable transportation, and ensure that work-based learning experiences are paid. Additionally, the design of these experiences should consider the degree to which paid work-based experiences impact family financial eligibility for state and federal programs designed to support families with low income and mitigate those impacts to the extent possible.⁷

Support services 🏛️ 📍

Economically disadvantaged learners are more likely to experience instability in their family life, housing and finances. They may also live in neighborhoods that lack accessible transportation and job opportunities. State and local leaders can provide wraparound support structures, such as referrals to connect learners to health care, housing, transportation and child care assistance, to remove barriers to program participation.⁶ Events for learners should be held in places that don't require an automobile for transportation, and one-on-one conversations should be conducted with learners about transportation needs.

Career counseling 🏛️ 📍

States and local leaders can invest in hiring, developing and retaining qualified career counselors and other career development professionals in high schools and colleges. These investments should also include relevant professional development, particularly for those working in underserved communities. These investments can ensure that staff have adequate knowledge, resources and tools to assist economically disadvantaged learners in exploring careers and navigating college and career pathways.

Stackable credential pipeline 🏛️ 📍

Policies and practices on the state and local levels that promote stackable credentials allow learners to earn credentials when they need them, balancing education and employment. Research shows that stacking credentials leads to positive economic outcomes for learners with low income, narrowing the earnings gap between low-income and middle- and high-income individuals.⁸

Waivers for tuition and fees 🏛️ 📍

Waiving application costs and program fees and providing program equipment and materials can remove barriers to participation for economically disadvantaged learners. Additionally, states can provide institutions with a grant equivalent to the value of waived tuition and fees to eliminate financial disincentives.

Data on access to and persistence in CTE 🏛️ 📍

State and local CTE leaders can disaggregate data to identify the programs that economically disadvantaged learners are enrolling in and whether they are persisting and completing those programs, providing valuable insights so that leaders can tailor support to address any gaps. Such adjustments can include monitoring and adjusting admission criteria, program design and other policies to ensure full representation by these learners in programs of study leading to careers that pay a family-sustaining wage.⁹

Direct and accessible promotional materials 🏛️ 📍

Research has shown that economically disadvantaged learners are skeptical of promotional language that is overly positive and provides generalized outcomes to program participation.¹⁰ Instead, state and local materials can include concrete details about the program's return on investment, recent graduates' employment and wage outcomes, and practical supports provided to learners that make education more feasible. Materials can be maximized by collaborating with organizations that already support learners and their families experiencing low income.


For additional resources, visit [Advance CTE's Perkins V Section](#), the [Maximizing Access and Success for Special Populations in Career Technical Education series page](#) in the [Learning that Works Resource Center](#) and [ACTE's Perkins Implementation page](#).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The strategies described above are not mutually exclusive, and not all will be appropriate based on the needs of your economically disadvantaged learner population. Before enacting new strategies, assess the current state of economically disadvantaged learners in your CTE programs and dig into root causes of barriers and challenges:

- What do economically disadvantaged learners tell you about their needs, challenges, and successes?
- What do your data show about the CTE participation and concentration of economically disadvantaged learners?
- What does your data show about the performance of economically disadvantaged learners?
- On the secondary level, what dual enrollment opportunities are available? How many economically disadvantaged youth participate in these opportunities?
- On the postsecondary level, how do you encourage economically disadvantaged learners to self-disclose their status so they can be eligible for services?
- How do you incorporate stackable credentials into your programs of study?
- How do you ensure that programs of study lead to family-sustaining wages that will provide economic mobility for learners? How do you promote these opportunities to economically disadvantaged learners, among others?
- How do you support economically disadvantaged learners in accessing equitable career counseling and exploration?
- What support services are available to economically disadvantaged learners? How are they made aware of these services?
- How are you building a culture and infrastructure to enable learners to take agency over their education, career and financial planning?
- Which agencies or community organizations could you connect with to support economically disadvantaged learners?

CASE STUDY

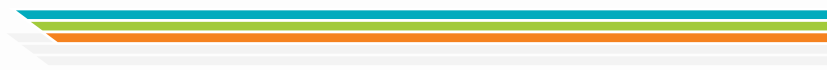


Since its inception in 2005, Arkansas' Career Pathway Initiative (CPI) has leveraged the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant to provide support services for more than 30,000 qualifying students enrolled in occupational programs administered by Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) at the state's community and technical colleges.¹¹ CPI empowers parents with low income to acquire in-demand credentials by integrating adult education and postsecondary training with essential support services, including case management, childcare and transportation assistance, and financial aid for tuition, books, supplies and testing fees. CPI is crucial in expanding economic opportunities in Arkansas, one of six states with a poverty rate exceeding 18 percent.

Despite facing substantial academic and employment challenges, CPI participants have demonstrated remarkable outcomes: more than half of all CPI enrollees earn at least one postsecondary credential or degree compared to just 24 percent of non-CPI participants, and CPI participants earned \$3,100 more per year than TANF recipients not enrolled in CPI programs.

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

- **Supporting First-Generation and Low-Income Students Beyond the College Acceptance Letter** (U.S. Department of Education, Homeroom Blog, 2021)
- **Developing State Policy that Supports Low-income, Working Students** (The Center for Law and Social Policy, 2018)
- **English Learners and Students from Low-Income Families** (National Council on Disability, 2018)
- **Investing in Postsecondary Career Pathways** (National Skills Coalition, 2017)
- **Making the Case for Supporting Low-Income Students** (Lumina Foundation)
- **Equity Measures in State Outcomes-Based Funding: Incentives for Public Colleges to Support Low-Income and Underprepared Students** (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2017)
- **Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative: How TANF Can Support Skills for Low-income Parents, and How Policymakers Can Help** (National Skills Coalition, 2016)



¹ Food Research & Action Center. (2018). Direct certification improves low-income student access to school meals: An updated guide to direct certification. <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/direct-certification-improves-low-income-student-access-to-school-meals-an-updated-guide-to-direct-certification>

² Ohio Department of Education. (2021). Economically disadvantaged students: A review of definitions and methods across states. <https://www.lsc.ohio.gov/assets/organizations/legislative-service-commission/monthly-agency-reports/agency-reports/files/mar-138-economically-disadvantaged-students-2020.pdf>

³ Delisle, J. (2017). The Pell Grant proxy: A ubiquitous but flawed measure of low-income student enrollment. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-pell-grant-proxy-a-ubiquitous-but-flawed-measure-of-low-income-student-enrollment/>

⁴ Advance CTE & Association for Career and Technical Education. (2021). With learners, not for learners: A toolkit for elevating learner voice in CTE. <https://careertech.org/resource/with-learners-not-for-learners-a-toolkit-for-elevating-learner-voice-in-cte/>

⁵ Texas Higher Ed Data. (2023). Ensuring students attain credentials of value. Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. <https://data.highered.texas.gov/credentials-of-value/>

⁶ Advance CTE & Association for Career and Technical Education. (2021). With learners, not for learners: A toolkit for elevating learner voice in CTE. <https://careertech.org/resource/with-learners-not-for-learners-a-toolkit-for-elevating-learner-voice-in-cte/>

⁷ Wilson, B. (2017). Work-based learning policy for out-of-school youth and disadvantaged adults. <https://careertech.org/resource/work-based-learning-policy-for-out-of-school-youth-and-disadvantaged-adults/>

⁸ Daugherty, L., Bahr, P. R., Nguyen, P., May-Trifiletti, J., Columbus, R., & Kushner, J. (2023). Stackable credential pipelines and equity for low-income individuals. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2484-1.html

⁹ National Education Policy Center. (2020). Tracking and the future of career and technical education: How efforts to connect school and work can avoid the past mistakes of vocational education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED605784>

¹⁰ The Aspen Institute. (2019). Who are we missing? Understanding and reaching underrepresented prospective community college students. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/understanding-and-reaching-underrepresented-prospective-community-college-populations/>

¹¹ DeRenzis, B., & Kaleba, K. (2016). Arkansas Career Pathway Initiative: How TANF can support skills for low-income parents, and how policymakers can help. <https://careertech.org/resource/arkansas-career-pathways-initiative-how-tanf-can-support-skills-for-low-income-parents-and-how-policymakers-can-help/>

