

## Frequently Asked Questions

This resource provides an accessible format to answer the most common questions about the Advancing the Framework initiative to modernize the National Career Clusters® Framework, the validation process, and steps after an updated Framework is released.

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### The National Career Clusters Framework: The Basics

#### **Q: What is the National Career Cluster® Framework?**

**A:** The Career Clusters Framework has been a crucial catalyst that helped transform what was once known as vocational education to Career Technical Education (CTE). The National Career Cluster® Framework organizes occupations for CTE learners into industry clusters and embedded sub-groupings that learners can experience and explore. It has been a central building block to achieving consistently designed and high-quality CTE programs that provide meaningful, career-relevant education experiences to learners and talent pipelines to industry.

#### **Q: Is the Framework part of a federal government program?**

**A:** The Framework was established in 2002 through a collaborative effort between the federal government and states. Since that time, Advance CTE, on behalf of the states, has been its steward. While Career Technical Education (CTE) is supported by federal dollars through the Perkins Act and other grant programs, the Framework itself is neither federally mandated nor funded.

#### **Q: Are states required to use the National Career Clusters Framework?**

**A:** While states are not mandated to use the Framework, the majority of states do use the Framework in some fashion to organize CTE programs at the state and local levels. All states are required to use the 16 Career Clusters when reporting their Perkins-related data to the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education also uses the Framework to organize data reporting for federal grants that support CTE, and as such, all states use the Framework to at least organize these annual data submissions.

## Summer 2024 Draft Modernized National Career Clusters Framework: An Overview

### **Q: Is the Framework still organized by Career Clusters?**

**A:** Yes, the Framework is still organized by Career Clusters. However, the organizing principle for what qualifies as a Cluster has shifted.

In the past, Career Clusters were built around generalized education programs. The modernized Framework has shifted to industry-oriented, sector-specific Career Clusters defined by labor market information and industry sector research and validation. This shift aims to achieve an industry-driven Framework that more accurately reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the world of work. As a result, the Framework was reduced from 16 to 14 Career Clusters.

The draft Framework also contains several proposed taxonomy changes. In particular, the use of the word 'pathways', now used in numerous contexts across education and work, has been changed to the broader level of 'subcluster'. This change allows for flexibility for states and communities to adjust the Framework to their needs, and to accommodate future high-skill, living-wage industry sectors as they emerge.

### **Q: What is the methodology used to guide the organization of the draft modernized Framework?**

**A:** The modernization of the Framework was guided by a rigorous combination of quantitative and qualitative research, including:

- **Development of detailed industry profiles** based on U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics research and an extensive review of all North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes. These frameworks, essential for understanding occupational demand and industry context, are used to ensure the Career Clusters are aligned with federal industry and occupational standards.
- **Input and Review by 13 distinct Industry Advisory Groups (IAGs)** totaling over 200 members to serve as sector-specific representatives who help ensure that the Framework is a responsive bridge between education and work. The groups, which were selected through an open nomination process, represent a diverse range of attributes, including company profile, geography, and racial diversity.
- **A National Implementation Survey** garnering over 2,000 responses, providing broad insights into current and future Framework needs from CTE professionals across the nation.
- **Multiple consultations with CTE-connected partners** through workshops, input groups, and focus groups including educators, state and local CTE leaders, national education and workforce organizations, and more on Framework needs and input on early drafts
- **A thorough current state and gap analysis** early in the process reflecting Career Cluster adaptations by all 50 states, assessing the effectiveness and reach of current frameworks.
- **A public national validation survey** open to all members of the CTE community to provide input on the overall design and individual Career Clusters of a draft modernized Framework.

**Q: What has been removed from the Framework?**

**A:** No field has been eliminated from the Framework, though some have been shifted into other Career Clusters, combined with other industry sectors, or renamed to more accurately reflect current industry taxonomy and structure.

**Q: What are the major changes that emerge in this draft modernized Framework?**

**A:** Major changes to the Framework are guided by the methodology outlined above and our purpose statement (see below). Realignment of industry sectors reflects the structure of the world of work and shared skills and competencies across career fields. Some of the major changes include:

**Additional Industries and Technologies**

- Energy has been merged with Natural Resources into a new, realigned Career Cluster
- Introduction of new technologies, including automation and robotics (Advancing Manufacturing Career Cluster), clean and alternative energy (Energy and Natural Resources Career Cluster), and artificial intelligence and unmanned vehicles (Digital Technology Career Cluster)
- Introduction of major modern industry focuses, including advanced technologies, automation, robotics, etc.
- Information Technology expanded to Digital Technology

**Combined Career Clusters**

- The four dimensions of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) are now dispersed across multiple Career Clusters. Engineering has been further disaggregated and is represented in multiple Career Clusters, and the individual STEM Career Cluster has been eliminated to avoid duplication and more accurately reflect how both industry and programs of study are designed.
- Law, public safety, administration, and public service have been realigned into a combined Career Cluster.
- Separate Health Sciences & Human Services Career Clusters have been combined into the Health & Human Services Cluster.

**Cross-Cutting Clusters**

- Cross-cutting Clusters are designed to be both stand-alone Career Clusters, but also reflect the careers and organizational functions that can be further embedded within all other sectors of our economy.
- Cross-cutting Clusters: digital technology, management & entrepreneurship, and marketing & sales.

**Q. What is Advance CTE doing to ensure that the modernized Framework reflects the current and future labor markets as well as the changing world of work?**

**A:** The modernized Framework is being developed and organized based on an analysis of the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) and Standard Occupation Codes (SOC), combined with sector-specific labor market research. The resulting Career Clusters and underlying information have been validated by industry professionals in each sector and shared through industry sector profiles that will be published with the finalized Framework. At the same time, we are working to ensure the design will be flexible enough to accommodate emerging and future occupations and allows states to accommodate their unique economic and workforce needs.

Once the modernized Framework is finalized, states have the option to adopt the modernized Framework as is, incorporate elements of the Framework into existing systems, or customize the Framework in other ways to organize their CTE programs to meet their own particular needs.

## **Q. What are the Career Ready Practices, and how are they connected to the Framework?**

The Career Ready Practices, last updated in 2012, is a framework for the developmental experiences and skills necessary to become career ready. These practices can be “practiced” or gained using many different approaches in a variety of settings, including through Career Technical Education (CTE programs across all Career Clusters). Learners refine these practices throughout their full continuum of learning.

The National Validation Survey includes questions to provide input on a draft of updated Career Ready Practices, based on a meta-analysis of over 30 different listings of general professional skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace, including from industry, secondary and postsecondary education agencies and national organizations.

## **Advancing the Framework Modernization Initiative: The Basics**

### **Q: Why is the National Career Clusters Framework being updated?**

**A:** It has been over two decades since we established the National Career Cluster Framework, and the labor market, the nature of work and the workplace, and technology have changed dramatically over that time period. From the rise of artificial intelligence and the greening economy to the need for more flexibly prepared and nimble workers, it is imperative that our CTE system remains responsive and forward looking. The Framework in its current form is not reflective of today’s labor market and is not dynamic enough to ensure all learners are prepared for the ever-changing economy and workplace and can attain living wage, in-demand jobs.

### **Q: Is there a guiding principle for this project?**

**A:** The [Advancing the Framework](#) modernization initiative is working to build an industry-informed, learner-centered, and responsive Framework that can support changes in work that have taken place and continue to evolve. Our north star through this process is a renewed purpose statement, unanimously approved by Advance CTE’s Boards of Directors in September 2020: *The National Career Clusters Framework provides structural alignment and a common language to bridge education and work, empowering each learner to explore, decide on and prepare for dynamic and evolving careers.*

### **Q. How will a modernized Framework help learners and CTE partners?**

**A:** A modernized Framework will more accurately reflect industry’s organization, encompass the breadth of the entire and evolving world of work, and provide flexibility for the future. It will serve as a bridge for education to reflect this structure in their CTE systems and programs. It will give learners more personalized paths to living wage jobs and gain skills for a variety of careers; CTE leaders and educators a means to align and design programs that better prepare learners for these careers; and ensure that industry has learners of all ages with interests, skills, and experiences that match their hiring needs. A modernized Framework will reflect the truly interdisciplinary nature of work and push the CTE community to remove silos within and across Career Clusters. This will be a major next step to improving the quality of CTE programs and ensure all learners are fully prepared for the workplace no matter what career they pursue.

## **Q. How has the initiative been collecting and incorporating feedback from state CTE leaders, educators, industry experts, and partners of the Framework?**

**A:** Advance CTE is committed to an inclusive and meaningful process to solicit and respond to feedback from all partners of the Framework. Our national structures, surveys, and sector-specific feedback sessions have given us information that is guiding the development of the Framework. We have brought representatives from across the CTE field together to solicit ongoing feedback through:

- Advance CTE's Board of Directors and a National Advisory Committee that comprises 23 members representing national, state, and local CTE leaders.
- Thirteen distinct Industry Advisory Groups (IAGs) totaling over 200 members each selected through an open nomination process.
- Input from nearly 2,100 CTE stakeholders who responded late last year to the National Implementation Survey.
- Focus groups and listening sessions conducted in late 2023 and Spring 2024 that gathered further input from educators, counseling professionals, and representatives of the educational technology community across more than 50 organizations on Framework needs and input on early Framework drafts.
- A public national validation survey for all members of the CTE community to provide input on the draft modernized Framework open June 6-July 7, 2024.

We will continue to collect feedback from these structures throughout the development of the Framework, as well as offer a public validation survey for all members of the CTE community to provide evidence-based input on the draft Framework.

## **Q. How does this process differ from previous efforts to update the Framework?**

**A:** Advance CTE has structured this process to be a more transparent and stakeholder-driven process. Most notably, the process is industry driven through 13 Industry Advisory Groups representing over 200 industry representatives. There has been ongoing feedback from professionals and national partner organizations both in and connected to CTE via a National Advisory Committee and focus groups, which were not part of the previous Framework update efforts. Their regular engagement will continue throughout the validation process in addition to opportunities for individual input from the full CTE community.

## **Advancing the Framework: The Road Ahead**

### **Q. What is your timeline for this project?**

**A:** Our goal is to release the final updated Framework along with a set of initial supporting materials by the end of 2024. Prior to this release, Advance CTE will take time to consider all input gathered throughout the validation phase, including a public validation survey open to all CTE professionals and connected partners. Throughout 2025, Advance CTE will build out additional resources and supports to help states and communities adopt and implement the modernized Framework in the years to come.

### **Q. How quickly will states need to act to implement the updated Framework?**

**A:** Once the Framework is approved by Advance CTE's Boards of Directors, states will design and execute an implementation strategy that adopts the entire Framework, or incorporates elements of the Framework into existing systems, to organize their CTE programs. This is a state-by-state decision. While some states may want to be early adopters and make changes as soon as the Framework is released, others may need or choose to take a more deliberative approach to be able to learn from early adopter states and work as a broad-based community to address implementation issues.

### **Q: How will Advance CTE support states in implementing the Framework?**

**A:** Advance CTE will work closely with states during the implementation phase by providing both general resources and materials as well as working on state-specific needs that align with the pace at which a state chooses to adopt the Framework. Some tools will be available immediately, while others will be released as state needs and implementation challenges emerge. Supports will include but are not limited to:

- A one-stop website and resource repository
- A white paper identifying key policy recommendations for elevating state systems and policies, including how to: adapt their educational licensure system or establish certifications for particular fields; consider how to organize data and information for federal reporting; etc.
- A self-guided technical assistance tool to assess and plan key aspects of implementation
- Lessons from the field sharing how states have addressed implementation challenges
- Navigation tools and cross-sector perspectives to demonstrate how different fields of study—from green workforce and climate-connected careers to engineering fields and family and consumer sciences—can be identified across Career Clusters
- Crosswalks that show how Career Clusters and pathways in the original Framework were adjusted in the new Framework. These crosswalks will be designed to create clarity around the changes to the framework and how those changes ultimately impact implementation. For example, states may need to update course coding strategies, licensure or funding rules, or data reporting and use strategies. These crosswalks will ultimately support states in developing and executing their state-specific implementation plans.

We are considering additional tools and guidance and would welcome feedback on the types of information that state CTE leaders and educators at all levels would find valuable.

### **Q. How can I or my organization get involved?**

**A:** Advance CTE is committed to a transparent, inclusive process to ensure the modernized Framework meets the needs of all users, but we need your help! We will be providing regular updates on the process through the Advance CTE website and encourage you to participate in the National Validation Survey and share explainer and promotional materials for the Framework and the survey that are available on the [Advancing the Framework webpage](#). During the implementation phase, we will also issue a call for partner organizations to share resources to accompany the Framework.

For questions or additional information, email [careerclusters@careertech.org](mailto:careerclusters@careertech.org).

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