

Modernizing the National Career Clusters® Framework: Frequently Asked Questions – October 2024

This resource provides an accessible format to answer the most common questions about the modernized National Career Clusters® Framework, the modernization and validation process, and steps towards adoption and implementation.

Advance CTE’s website has a [dedicated section](#) about the modernized National Career Clusters Framework, including information on

- Background on the modernization initiative
- Organization and terminology
- Impact of the Framework on key audiences connected to CTE
- The road ahead for support and resource development

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. Advance CTE is the steward of the Framework.

Q: Why was the National Career Clusters Framework updated?

A: It has been over two decades since we established the National Career Clusters 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. A modernized Framework is needed that is reflective of today’s labor market and is dynamic enough to ensure all learners are prepared for the ever-changing economy and workplace and can attain living wage, in-demand jobs.

Q: Who led the modernization of the National Career Clusters Framework, and who was involved in its development?

A: Advance CTE, as steward of the Framework, led the modernization, as recommended by State CTE Directors and other organizational members. From the beginning, Advance CTE was committed to an inclusive and meaningful process to solicit and respond to feedback from all partners of the Framework, including state and local secondary and postsecondary leaders, employers, national organizations including educators groups and Career Technical Student Organizations, CTE instructors, and other partners. Since 2022, over 4,000 people were involved in this process, from all 50 states, DC and other US territories.

Visit [About the Framework](#) for an overview of the input and validation process. For a more detailed explanation visit the Advancing the Framework [initiative webpage](#).

Q: Who uses the Framework, and how does it impact me?

A: The Framework was designed so primary users of the Framework are state and local CTE leaders who leverage the Framework for the organization and design of CTE programs of study. However, Everyone connected to the larger career preparation ecosystem is encouraged to use the Framework. It is a foundational tool for CTE but can also be used beyond CTE for career pathways, youth and adult Registered Apprenticeships, career advising systems and more.

Success of the Framework and serving as a true bridge requires meaningful and ongoing collaboration across all partners connected to CTE. Visit the [About the Framework page](#) for a breakdown of how the Framework impacts and benefits a variety of audiences, including educators, industry and employers, career advising professionals, state and local CTE leaders, and more.

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 to be educational groupings using common knowledge and skill statements. 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 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 ‘Sub-Cluster’. 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, with a commitment for the Framework to be reflective of the organization of the world of work and to ultimately serve as a bridge to inform education systems and programs. In addition to the multi-method approach, the research process was designed with rigorous attention to diverse perspectives and opportunities for iterative feedback loops to ensure continuous improvement throughout the research process. This feedback process resulted in 15 iterations of the Framework, each taking into consideration feedback from multiple audiences on the previous version.

Visit the [Methodology page](#) for an overview of the sources used to guide decisions for Framework modernization, as well as technical documents that provide a detailed account of each step in the process, including how audience feedback and labor market analysis informed the final Framework

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

A: 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 as well as through work-based learning experiences, capstone projects, and even academic courses. Learners refine these practices throughout their full continuum of learning.

The updated Career Ready Practices were reviewed as part of the National Validation Survey conducted in summer 2024.

Q: What were the major changes to the Framework?

A: The new Career Clusters are designed to incorporate the entire world of work, including areas that still require technical or applied skills not traditionally connected to CTE programs of study. 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.

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, Corrections, & Security and Government & Public Administration have been realigned into a combined Career Cluster.
- Separate Health Sciences & Human Services Career Clusters have been combined into the Healthcare & Human Services Cluster.

Cross-Cutting Career Clusters

- Cross-Cutting Career 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 Career Clusters: Digital Technology; Management & Entrepreneurship; and Marketing & Sales.

Q: How quickly will the new Framework be adopted and implemented?

A: Implementation will not happen immediately, as states need time to determine whether or not they will adopt the Framework, as is or with modifications, and on what timeline that makes sense for them and their learner and industry needs. Regardless of the speed of implementation, Advance CTE will be supporting the field at every step of the way. Visit The Road Ahead for information on timelines for implementation and current/upcoming resources developed to support the field.

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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. Currently, all states are required to use the 16 Career Clusters comprising the former Framework when reporting their Perkins-related data to the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education will require to use the modernized Framework when submitted Perkins-related data starting with the 2025-2026 academic year. The Department 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.

Q. How can I or my organization get involved?

A: National organizations have been active input and validation participants, and will be valuable partners during the adoption and implementation process. Multiple organizations have committed to cultivating guidance documents on Framework integration and implementation. Later this year, organization will be able to submit resources connected to Framework implementation for review by Advance and request that they be posted on Advance CTE's website.

Individuals can stay connected to the initiative through our regular updates by [signing up](#) for our newsletters and update emails.

For questions or additional information, email careerclusters@careertech.org.