

Modernizing the National Career Clusters® Framework: Frequently Asked Questions – June 2025

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.

The website for Advance CTE, the steward of the Framework, has a [dedicated section](#) about the modernized National Career Clusters Framework, including:

- Background on the modernization initiative
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Framework Basics

Q: What is the National Career Clusters® 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.

The Framework consists of 14 Career Clusters, including 3 Cross-Cutting Clusters, and 72 Sub-Clusters organized in 6 Clustering Groupings. Initially developed in 2002, the Framework was modernized in 2024 after a two-year input process to meet the evolving needs of education and industry.

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 expansive 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 educator groups and Career Technical Student Organizations, CTE

instructors, and other partners. Over 4,000 individuals 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.

Visit the [About the Framework page](#) for a breakdown of how the Framework impacts and benefits a variety of audiences, including educators, industry, career advising professionals, CTE leaders, and more.

Q: What is the methodology used to guide the organization of the 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.

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. The [technical report](#) provides in-depth explanations of decisions made in regards to Framework design.

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

A: The [Career Ready Practices](#) are 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.

Modernization Highlights

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 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: What terminology changes were made for the modernized Framework?

A: 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.

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Resources

Q: Is there a crosswalk from the original Career Clusters to the modernized Career Clusters?

A: Yes — the crosswalk of original Career Clusters to modernized Career Clusters can be found starting on page 48 of the [Technical Report](#). We also provide a crosswalk to national labor market information.

Q: Will the Common Career Technical Core standards and/or the Knowledge and Skills Statements be updated?

A: The modernized Framework is designed to be adaptable to state needs and structure. Throughout the implementation of the original Framework, many states

developed their own standards and competencies for each Cluster. Therefore, Advance CTE does not plan to update the Common Career Technical Core standards or the Knowledge and Skills Statements.

Q: Will Advance CTE's Career Interest Survey be updated?

A: Yes — Advance CTE plans to release an updated Career Interest Survey in 2025.

Q: My state has not yet implemented the modernized Framework. Are the original Framework documents available?

A: Limited documents for the original Framework are available while states are considering and implementing the modernized Framework and can be found in our [Career Clusters Archive](#).

Q: Will there be a Spanish language version of the Framework wheel design?

A: Yes, a Spanish version of the Framework wheel graphic will be available Summer 2025. A [Spanish guidebook](#) is available in the Learning that Works Resource Center.

Q: Will there be an editable version of the Framework?

A: An editable version of the Framework wheel graphic is available for members on Advance CTE's [member portal](#).

Implementation

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

A: Full Implementation will take years, 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 [Resources](#) page for briefs that provide policy guidance and promising practices across systems alignment, personalized pathways, and more.

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. The U.S. Department of Education has issued guidance that requires states to update collection systems to use the modernized Framework when submitting Perkins-related data using the January 2027 Consolidated Annual Report (CAR), reporting data from 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: Will the updated Framework impact what CTE program educators can teach?

A: Educators are the backbone of successful CTE programs. The design of the modernized Framework is intended to compel policy changes that will expand the number of courses a CTE educator will be permitted to teach, rather than restricting instruction to one Career Cluster. This will require innovations in credentialing, professional development, course design, and more that will benefit both educators and learners.

Q: How are you collaborating with O*NET to update occupation searches by Career Cluster?

A: O*NET has [updated](#) its systems to align with the new Framework. We continue to work with them to ensure they have the necessary resources and will keep the field posted about changes or updates.

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, Organizations can submit resources connected to Framework implementation for review by Advance and request that they be posted on Advance CTE's website via the [Call for Resources form](#).

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.