

THE BASICS


The National Career Clusters[®] Framework



This resource serves as a primer to the [National Career Clusters Framework](#), its modernization, and an introduction to implementation. More detailed tools and guides can be found here.

In the late 1990s, with the support of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE, then called the Office of Vocational and Adult Education), Advance CTE began the process of creating a new framework for Career Technical Education (CTE) to build consistency in program design and quality nationwide, centered around the knowledge, skills, and standards a learner would need to complete each career pathway. States and industry partners led this work, and Advance CTE managed the overarching process. Advance CTE published the new framework, known as The National Career Clusters Framework, on behalf of states in 2002.

In the 22 years since, Advance CTE has served as the steward of the Framework, creating Career Ready Practices and a Common Career Technical Core; adding a Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics Career Cluster; developing multiple new career pathways; and supporting an annual Career Clusters Institute. In 2020, with the support of State CTE Directors and other core members, Advance CTE began the process to update and modernize the Framework and bring it into alignment with the current and future world of work.



As part of this process, Advance CTE’s Board of Directors approved the following purpose statement, which served as the north star for the direction of this modernization: “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.” The modernized Framework, designed to be learner centric and industry driven, is organized in a way that is similar to the world of work—using federal labor codes and national labor market data. This alignment builds connections between secondary and postsecondary programs of study and industry as a whole, which will benefit all learners, regardless of age, gender, race, geography, or learner level.



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Why Modernize the Framework?

In the more than 2 decades since the Framework was initially conceived, the world of work has changed dramatically. The rise of telework and remote workplaces has continued to increase the pace of these changes. While mass resignations in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic have slowed, employees are continuing to change jobs over their lifetimes at a more rapid pace, requiring flexibility in what they know and how they can adapt to a career of their choosing.¹

Simultaneously, workplaces increasingly require transferable skillsets, and the skillsets needed for a variety of different positions overlap considerably.² Workplaces that once hired for specific positions and skills now require a growing skillset that is supplemented by digital skills, entrepreneurial mindsets, and interdisciplinary backgrounds. Employers are seeking more than credentials when hiring; instead they are seeking a better understanding of an individual’s skills to meet the qualifications of a certain position.³

Skills-based hiring has become more than a trend, with multiple states setting precedents with credential-agnostic hiring of state employees.⁴ New and ever more rapidly emerging sectors such as electric vehicle and semiconductor manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and data science, as well as the use of technology across all fields, dominate the headlines as these sectors seek to find more talent than is available.

Despite these changes to the world of work, the Framework has remained relatively stagnant. While the Framework and its underlying supports have served their purpose over the past 2 decades, many of these tools, resources, and supports became outdated as states began to develop their own standards for a more state-appropriate Framework.

The original Framework was prescriptive, providing specific standards and Knowledge and Skills Statements for career pathways; while these details were necessary at the time, states have adapted and adjusted their use of the Framework to be more in line with their own needs.

As such, the modernized Framework serves as a customizable and malleable organizational tool built around the organization of the labor market, rather than prescribing which career pathways a state should offer. Similarly, as states updated their career pathways systems, many leaders had difficulty discerning where new and emerging sectors should fit into the ever more outdated Framework. The modernized Framework is designed to incorporate the entirety of the world of work, embracing these new sectors and incorporating them as appropriate and directed by industry into the Clusters and Sub-Clusters that best align with new and emerging sectors.



The changes to the world of work similarly required a greater variety of options for learners to find a path forward through an aligned and comprehensive career preparation ecosystem with multiple on- and off-ramps. While the original Framework was often more appropriate for secondary learners, the modernized Framework seeks to apply to all learner levels and encourages both secondary and postsecondary at the state and local levels to organize their systems with this expansion in mind.

What Does the Framework Do?

The modernized Framework is designed to be used primarily by state and local leaders—and leveraged by local educators—to benefit CTE learners of all ages. The Framework will help state and local education agencies organize and describe their CTE and career pathways systems (particularly, secondary and postsecondary programs of study) in a way that is consistent with the organization and descriptors used by industry and national labor codes.

The modernized Framework is designed for state and local leaders to be the primary users of the Framework, to be leveraged by local educators, and to benefit CTE learners of all ages.

For this reason, it can also be leveraged for state and national data reporting and accountability to provide consistent and regular data that help leaders make informed decisions about the improvement of their systems. Many local counselors and instructors can employ the Framework and its many tools to support career exploration and decisionmaking. It can help them demonstrate the diversity of careers in the world of work or the breadth of careers within a given Career Cluster.

Despite its many uses, the Framework is not designed as a one-size-fits-all model. While we believe in the national methodology, we also recognize that not all states will offer career pathways or programs of study in all 14 new Career Clusters, depending on their state's need.

States and local agencies can and should use the Framework as a starting point and explore their own labor market data to determine how to adjust the Framework to best fit their needs. For this reason, while we have shared possible program of study titles for each Sub-Cluster, the Framework is not prescriptive about the entirety of the high-quality programs of study that can and should exist, nor is it a tool to define the merit for programs to exist or what standards or curriculum is most appropriate for a program in a given state or local institution.

Value of State-Level Adoption

Given this customizability, the Framework provides considerable value for adoption at the state and local levels. While many policies may need to be adjusted for implementation (see our [brief](#) on initial policy pushes for more specific examples), statewide adoption of the modernized Framework allows for cross- and interstate comparability, even if slightly adjusted to meet regional employer demand.

The newly updated Career Ready Practices still provide a framing for the competencies needed by all learners to be “career ready” before entering into a career path of their choosing, regardless of the sector



Visit the [Your Place in the Framework webpage](#) for more details on how key CTE actors connect to and use the Framework, as well as resources to support implementation.

States looking to adopt the modernized Framework can consider how programs of study can meet demand for new careers in emerging sectors, now included in each of the Career Clusters. The new Cross-Cutting Career Clusters can help advance how states and local agencies consider the interdisciplinary nature of the world of work and how these skills can be contextualized in and applied to all careers. Finally, the Framework can be used in conjunction with state and regional labor market information to help explore new opportunities for programs that require significant technical skill but may not have historically been considered under the umbrella of CTE.

The National Career Clusters Framework remains a valuable and consistent tool for leaders to drive progress and innovation in secondary and postsecondary systems. We hope states and local secondary and postsecondary institutions see a renewed value in the structural alignment and a common language in the modernized Framework, empowering each learner to explore, decide on, and prepare for dynamic and evolving careers. For more information about the Career Clusters and to explore the suite of resources that supports it, visit www.careertech.org/career-clusters.

Acknowledgements

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¹Broom, D. (2023, May 2). Having many careers will be the norm, experts say. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/workers-multiple-careers-jobs-skills/>

²Nägele, C., & Stalder, B. E. (2017). Competence and the need for transferable skills. In M. Mulder (Ed.), *Technical and Vocational Education and Training: Issues, Concerns and Prospects: Vol. 23. Competence-based vocational and professional education: Bridging the worlds of work and education* (pp. 739–753). Springer. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christof-Naegel/publication/307942989_Competence_and_the_Need_for_Transferable_Skills/links/5fbd3d5d458515b797695ba8/Competence-and-the-Need-for-Transferable-Skills.pdf

³Hancock, B., Higgins, C., Law, J., Olson, S., Patel, N., & Van Dusen, K. (2022, November 15). Taking a skills-based approach to building the future workforce. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/taking-a-skills-based-approach-to-building-the-future-workforce>

⁴ National Governors Association. (2024, April 24). Governors innovate to spur skills-based hiring. <https://www.nga.org/news/commentary/governors-innovate-to-spur-skills-based-hiring/>