

A large satellite dish is positioned in the center of the image, set against a vast desert landscape. The dish is white with a blue base and is mounted on a complex metal structure. A dirt road leads from the foreground towards the dish. The sky is a deep blue, and the horizon shows a mix of orange and yellow light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is serene and expansive.

Creating a Career Pathways System in New Mexico: A Talent Pipeline Strategy

Executive Summary | December 2020

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About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 36 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Join us as we build a future that works.

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Executive Summary

New Mexico seeks to create an equitable career pathways system that more effectively integrates education and workforce development to better prepare its future workforce, with adult and corrections education playing critical roles in that system.

JFF, a national nonprofit that has driven transformation in the American workforce and education systems for 36 years, was contracted by the New Mexico Higher Education Department's Adult Education Division to carefully examine the role of adult and corrections education in the state's career pathways landscape. Creating effective career pathways systems, which integrate education and workforce development in order to better prepare the workforce of the future, has emerged as a key priority for state governments, regional entities, and nonprofit organizations. The goal of such systems is to align resources at the state, regional, and local levels so that learners and workers can choose a career area and follow a sequence of education and training opportunities that lead to a credential of value in their regional labor market. Like many states, New Mexico has programs and components of a pathways system in place and would now like to create more coherence across them and strengthen the state's career pathways system, bringing to life New Mexico's state and federal plans for education and workforce development with a focus on high-quality, equitable implementation.

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated problems that existed in New Mexico before the pandemic and has brought into question the viability of the governor's priority sectors to serve as the foundation for a talent pipeline strategy.

This project was planned before the COVID-19 pandemic and its corresponding economic crisis. At that time, issues like the digital divide, low retention in adult education programs, and a poor economy already existed. It was also at that time that the governor's 11 priority sectors—groups of industries that held promise in supporting existing businesses and attracting employers to the state while stopping brain drain in the process—were believed to be key to New Mexico's future economic prosperity and ideal destinations for the state's career pathways. But with the pandemic came sheltering in place, an even worse economy, and unprecedented unemployment, each with its own impact.

Sheltering in place meant not attending in-person education and training, exacerbating the effects of the digital divide as learning shifted to online. In a rural state where equitable internet access is a challenge, this shift had a collateral effect of decreasing enrollment. Enrollment was also impacted by the economy, either because finding work was prioritized over going to school or life circumstances such as childcare took precedence. Unprecedented unemployment

reflected the shrinking of industries and shuttering of businesses. It had the immediate effect of taxing state workforce and economic development agencies as they pivoted to processing unemployment insurance claims and helping surviving businesses stay afloat. A longer-term impact of unemployment of this magnitude will be a workforce surplus, with lower-skilled adults competing with higher-skilled, better-educated individuals—who are immediately employable—for the few jobs that currently exist and those that will slowly emerge.

JFF’s labor market analysis of New Mexico suggests that, over the next decade, the governor’s priority sectors, once promising, will not grow as a whole at rates sufficient enough to absorb the sheer number of people seeking work (see table below). Healthcare as a sector *will* grow, but this is due to the high number of medical aide and assistant jobs that account for the majority of growth in that sector, jobs that often fail to pay a living wage. It would be better for the state to strengthen those existing career pathways and to create new ones that lead to in-demand jobs that are family-sustaining, either directly or by climbing an accessible and clearly defined career ladder. Given that a large percentage of those unemployed are lower-skilled adults, upskilling and reskilling them to compete in surviving and emerging labor markets will be critical to their employability and the state’s overall economic recovery. Adult education is well-positioned to lead on this front but would benefit from improvements if it is to become an integral part of an effective, statewide career pathways system.

New Mexico Priority Sectors Sorted by Projected Growth in the Number of Jobs by 2029

Sector	2019 Jobs	2029 Jobs	Change	% Change	Average Earnings Per Job*
Healthcare	108,646	131,060	22,414	21%	\$52,370
Cybersecurity	4,718	6,569	1,851	39%	\$92,507
Aerospace	24,477	26,285	1,808	7%	\$121,002
Global Trade	7,301	9,104	1,803	25%	\$62,548
Education	11,062	12,363	1,301	12%	\$46,396
Sustainable and Value-Added Agriculture	4,317	5,373	1,056	24%	\$37,806
Film & TV	2,111	2,603	492	23%	\$94,059
Outdoor Recreation	3,289	3,667	378	11%	\$28,668
Sustainable and Green Energy	49	70	21	43%	\$115,077
Biosciences	531	327	(204)	(38%)	\$83,613
Intelligent Manufacturing	10,265	9,650	(615)	(6%)	\$60,820

* Earnings below a living wage of \$24.27/hour (\$50,481.60/year) for one adult supporting one child appear in red.

Source: 2020.1 – QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed

There are bright spots in adult and corrections education, but each is challenged by issues of inconsistency and variability that must be addressed before they can serve lower-skilled adults effectively statewide.

JFF sought the input of nearly 50 stakeholders in preparation of its report, conducting phone interviews over a two-month period. Taken in the aggregate, these conversations confirmed that while there are bright spots and areas of potential in New Mexico’s adult and corrections education systems, both are plagued by inconsistency and variability. Adult education is impacted by the rural reality of the state and the digital divide, affecting access to physical and virtual schooling. Corrections education is impacted by lockdowns, transfers, and restricted access to technology. The information systems employed in both adult and corrections education are lacking, failing to track student enrollment and completion of programs and frustrating communication among service providers. Adult education must contend with the misperceptions that it exists either for rapid workforce development or is simply a point on a larger education continuum; students of corrections education must contend with the misconceptions that surround someone with a criminal record.

Variability and inconsistency in adult and corrections education must be addressed if they are to effectively serve the greater imperative of preparing lower-skilled adults for participation in an inclusive, statewide career pathways system.

Heeding JFF’s recommendations will result in improved adult and corrections education and the creation of an equitable career pathways system that gets lower-skilled adults to work and New Mexico on the road to economic recovery.

Simply addressing their sources of inconsistency and variability would fail to improve adult and corrections education in systemic and durable ways. Instead, a holistic approach to adult and corrections education improvement is called for, which mirrors the holistic approach necessary for creating an effective career pathways system, where multiple areas of need are addressed. Below are the high-level versions of JFF’s recommendations for creating an effective career pathways system in New Mexico, which are explored in greater depth in the accompanying *Roadmap for Creating a Strategic Talent Pipeline in New Mexico*.

Areas to be Addressed	Recommendations
Career Pathways Systems	Plan and create career pathways systems that lead to careers in both the governor’s priority sectors <i>and</i> those that provide family-supporting wages and benefits.

Cross-Agency and Cross-Sector Partnerships	Formalize a partnership between the Departments of Public Education, Higher Education, Workforce Solutions, Economic Development, and Corrections at the state level, and strengthen relationships across education, workforce development, and economic development at the regional and local levels.
A Place-Based Approach	Coordinate across sectors to increase opportunity for economic advancement in communities and regions to produce sustainable economic growth for all and deploy educational strategies with a focus on equity and inclusion.
Work-Based Learning	Create and scale equitable work-based learning opportunities that are integrated within career pathways and that deliver clear benefits for both participants and employers.
Policy and Funding	Ensure that policy and funding are appropriate and aligned with statewide goals, and that systems are in place to collect, manage, and leverage data.
Information Systems	Create comprehensive information systems that allow stakeholders to efficiently and effectively collect, share, and analyze data.
The Digital Divide	Address the digital divide and provide resources to address differential access experienced by lower-skilled and low-income New Mexicans.
Raising Collective Awareness	Develop and deploy an awareness campaign that informs New Mexicans about, and connects them to, education and training opportunities.
Corrections Education	Address the sources of variability in corrections education to build a reliable system that offers pathways to gainful employment for returning citizens.

Some of JFF's recommendations are very technical in nature, requiring a commitment of resources to strengthen existing and anticipated weaknesses in infrastructure. Narrowing the state's digital divide, mounting an awareness campaign, and improving and integrating state, regional, and local agencies' information systems are examples of technical approaches to the work. But other recommendations are more adaptive in nature and require a different type of commitment. They require a commitment to co-creating new solutions, with buy-in and support from key stakeholders working in collaboration to first name the need to create an effective career pathways system in New Mexico, to then establish a vision for what that system will look like and how *all* New Mexicans will benefit, and, finally, to commit to doing the work necessary to make the envisioned system a reality. Essential to this work will be attending to adult education, which is well-positioned at this time to make a difference in the lives of those who now find themselves unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Attending to corrections education will also be critical, allowing returning citizens to live their lives differently, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and credentials necessary to join the workforce as they rejoin society. In all, it will take material and commitment to create the pathways that lead to the prosperity New Mexico needs and deserves, now and going forward.