



Supporting Success in Online Learning

As the nation debates stimulus legislation to help the economy recover, it is critical to put in place policies that will create an equitable recovery. Raising overall economic activity will not equally distribute opportunity nor provide the relief needed for communities hit hardest by the crisis. The jobs that are created must be good jobs, and workers need support to secure those jobs, including increased access to effective education and training. To position the economy for an equitable long-term recovery, ambitious public investments are needed to create jobs with good wages and benefits, and major complementary investments in adult education and training are necessary to provide the support workers need to emerge from the crisis equipped for high quality jobs.

Supporting success in online learning is critical to an equitable recovery

The pandemic threatens to constrain the availability of rapid and effective career-oriented training programs when they are needed the most. Impacted workers—who are disproportionately people of color and people without formal post-secondary education—need access to a variety of training programs to help them adapt to rapidly changing economic conditions and access the good jobs that will emerge over time. Critical programs include:

- ◇ Programs that teach foundational skills that are precursors to career opportunities such as digital literacy training, remedial math, and English language learning
- ◇ Courses, certificates, and degrees that lead to good jobs in sectors likely to resume hiring more quickly. This includes rapid, modular training that lets people build new skills quickly
- ◇ Work-based learning and employer-provided training programs—offered with input from workers—that let people learn while they earn

Many in-person programs have either been cancelled or switched to online settings. Many adults are balancing new work and childcare arrangements that limit their ability to learn in person. The result has been an increase in demand for non-traditional and online learning options that give people the opportunity to quickly adapt to rapidly changing economic conditions. Despite the demand for online learning to be a greater part of the training landscape, gaps persist that will limit an equitable recovery if not addressed.

Federal policy should make new investments to make effective career-oriented online learning a possibility for every adult who wants to pursue it. Critically, policy should make sure that online learning can serve the needs of learners across socioeconomic and academic backgrounds.

*The ideas presented here are still in development and are designed to generate feedback and inform the discussion of how America might build a strong and inclusive recovery. We will continue to refine the proposals based on feedback.

Key Elements

Public investment should prioritize the following inter-related goals to increase access and strengthen the effectiveness of career-oriented online learning for all learners:

- ◇ **Scale the most effective online programs.** The federal government should identify the most effective online training programs that will help workers succeed in jobs and help them scale quickly to reach more learners.
- ◇ **Incentivize the creation of effective new online programs that fill gaps in the current training landscape.** During this period of rapid economic transformation, people need help building new capabilities to help them compete for the good jobs that come back over time. This requires an approach to training that recognizes the capabilities workers already have and gives them the chance to identify and build any additional skills that they might need. Federal funding should be available to create innovative new programs that fill unmet need in the training landscape.
- ◇ **Provide tuition support to help make effective online learning affordable for those who want it.** Federal support for scaling and creating new online learning programs—outlined above—should cover tuition. Support should be at least as generous as Pell so that these programs are as accessible as established programs. Additionally, a small stipend should be available to all unemployed workers to pursue low-cost, career-oriented online programs. Finally, for training offered by employers, complementary policy should help employers cover costs of the workers' wages to increase earn-and-learn opportunities, and steps should be taken to give workers voice in the training that is offered.
- ◇ **Help the most successful in-person programs transition online.** The federal government should provide funding to help the most effective national in-person, career-oriented programs like Year Up or Per Scholas successfully transition to online instruction to continue to effectively serve their students during the pandemic.
- ◇ **Fund new partnerships focused on improving the delivery of online education to underserved populations.** To address longstanding challenges in the effective delivery of online education to underserved communities, the federal government should create large financial incentives for new and diverse coalitions of employers, educators, researchers, and impacted communities to work together to identify core challenges that limit the effective delivery of online education, develop new solutions, and share their learnings broadly.
- ◇ **Prioritize funding for programs with a track record of success in effectively serving communities of color.** Funding to expand access to effective online learning should be distributed with the explicit goal of empowering institutions with a track record of effectively serving the communities that have been hit hardest by the crisis.
- ◇ **Build the necessary infrastructure to evaluate the success of online programs.** As programs shift online, funding should be available to develop necessary measurement and evaluation mechanisms to understand how to best meet the needs of underserved populations in an online environment and make those learnings broadly available.

Policy Recommendations

1. Create a Department of Education grant focused on expanding effective online education

The Department of Education should offer competitive grants to increase the availability and affordability of effective online education that prepares people for good jobs. These grants should be distributed based on an assessment of current providers landscape, national understanding of where unmet needs for online education are greatest, and where new innovation would be most helpful to prepare people for good jobs.

Grants could be distributed as one grant with different components or through independent grants that are designed to achieve complementary goals. The grants could be administered in a way that resembles the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program that was part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act but with a focus on online education and a broader set of providers than community colleges alone. Another model could be the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grants.

- ◇ **“Scaling Grants” to help the most effective existing online providers serve more students.** Funding should go cover both programmatic and tuition costs of up to \$8,000 per student to help increase access to these effective programs. To ensure equitable access to training, priority should go to providers with experience serving communities that resemble the unemployed population or providers that partner with others that have that expertise. The maximum award for Scaling Grants should be high relative to traditional education and training grants so that more effective online programs can be made available as quickly as possible.

- ◇ **“Innovation Grants” to incentivize the creation of effective new online programs that fill gaps in the current training landscape.** Funding should support the creation of new programs and provide tuition of up to \$8,000 per student to help a limited number of students participate. Preference should be given to providers with a track record of success in online education. For programs delivered by new providers, steps should be taken to protect students from ineffective and predatory programs, and all providers should be required to transparently report disaggregated data about their outcomes.
- ◇ **“Digital Innovation Alliances” to improve delivery of online education to underserved populations.** With deep input from impacted communities, the federal government should identify core challenges that limit the effective delivery of online education to underserved populations. It should then offer financial incentives for collaborations of employers, educators, and researchers to leverage shared capabilities to develop new approaches to address these challenges and share their learnings broadly across the field. To incentivize meaningful collaboration across leading national organizations, a small number of generous prizes should be distributed.
- ◇ **“Transition Grants” for successful workforce programs to transition online.** Priority should go to programs with close connections to employers that provide training to sectors or communities otherwise unable to access training. An important component of these grants should be maintaining experiential and work-based learning components in an online environment. Given the large number of providers trying to adapt to online learning, funding should be distributed across a larger number of providers.
- ◇ **“Online Education Evaluation Funds” to increase understanding of what works and make lessons broadly available.** The federal government should dedicate funding for the Department of Education to work with third-party evaluators to put in place the necessary infrastructure to capture data to better learn how policy can improve digital learning, particularly to address equity gaps in student success and improve economic security for communities of color.

2. Dedicate funds to support career oriented online education as part of support for state and local governments

Federal policymakers should take urgent action to continue access to post-secondary education through support to state and local governments. Part of this funding should be dedicated to help states strengthen access to career-oriented online learning and build the foundation for a stronger adult learning system. Funding to states should include set asides to:

- ◇ **Transition effective career-oriented programs online.** Effectively transitioning a program online must go beyond streaming in-person curriculum online. There are real pedagogical changes required to create engaging virtual content, and new support are needed for students to ensure their success. States should prioritize aid to help institutions transition their most effective programs online, both during the pandemic and as a way to make these programs more accessible and affordable to working learners in the future. Funding should also support hybrid approaches in sectors like manufacturing and healthcare, where some components may need to happen in person but others could be delivered online.
- ◇ **Help the most effective online programs scale to serve more students.** The federal government should provide guidance to states identify effective online programs and require that a portion of state funds that should be used to help these programs expand to serve more students. In return for funding, states should also be asked to make effective online programs from other states more accessible to their residents by updating their eligible training provider lists to include online programs from other states that meet effectiveness guidelines.

3. Help people pay for digital programs in foundational skills through a small stipend that goes to all unemployed and low-wage workers

We recommend a small stipend of \$500 to all unemployed and low-wage workers to pursue low-cost programs that teach foundational skills: digital skills, English language learning, and basic math and literacy skills that are prerequisites to other courses. The funding level is meant to be low enough that there is not a need for a great deal of restrictions on this funding.

States should be responsible identifying criteria for low-cost programs that teach critical foundational skills and distribute the \$500 stipend to anyone who is an unemployed or low-wage worker who is interested in these programs.

Costs and Benefits

- ◇ A \$4.1 billion federal grant program to support online education would provide adequate funding to award between 300 and 350 competitive grants over four rounds to scale, develop, and evaluate effective online programs. This funding would also cover the cost of tuition and supportive services for over 175,000 students who choose to pursue online programs that are actively being scaled or newly developed.
- ◇ An additional \$3.7 billion investment would provide funding to equip more than 7.3 million people—or 1 in 10 unemployed or low-wage workers—with a \$500 stipend to pursue short-term, career-oriented programs that build skills necessary for success in the digital economy.

Implementation Considerations

1. Promoting racial equity to ensure equitable service delivery and success in online education

- ◇ When scaling effective online and in-person programs through either state or federal grants, it is critical to look at effectiveness for populations that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic—people without bachelor's degrees and people of color.
- ◇ When providing aid to states, the federal government should provide guidance on how states can assess which communities have been most impacted in their state and disaggregate state longitudinal data to look at employment and wage outcomes for those populations in particular.
- ◇ Within competitive federal grants, there should be some funding set aside or prioritization given to providers who have a track record of serving people of color effectively. For state grant programs, states should demonstrate that they have directed a minimum amount of funding to institutions with strong outcomes serving communities of color.

2. Support training providers that are preparing workers for in-demand quality jobs

- ◇ Across state and federal grants, priority should go to providers that are training people for high-demand, high-wage sectors in the state or local regions (e.g. manufacturing, information technology, health care, etc) in order to avoid subsidizing training for low-wage employers.
- ◇ For state grants, the federal government could provide guidance on what levels of demand, job growth, and wage levels are expected.