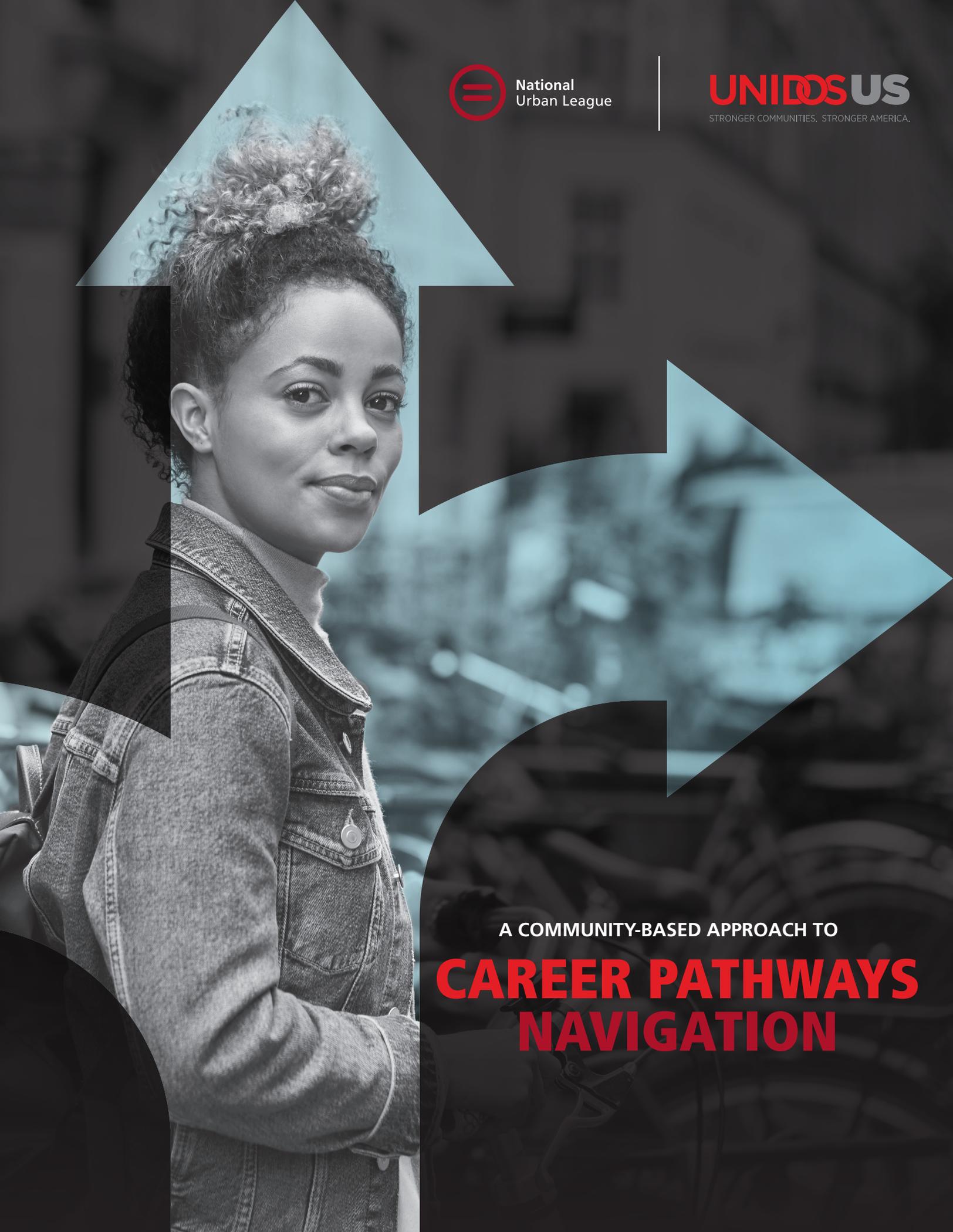




National
Urban League

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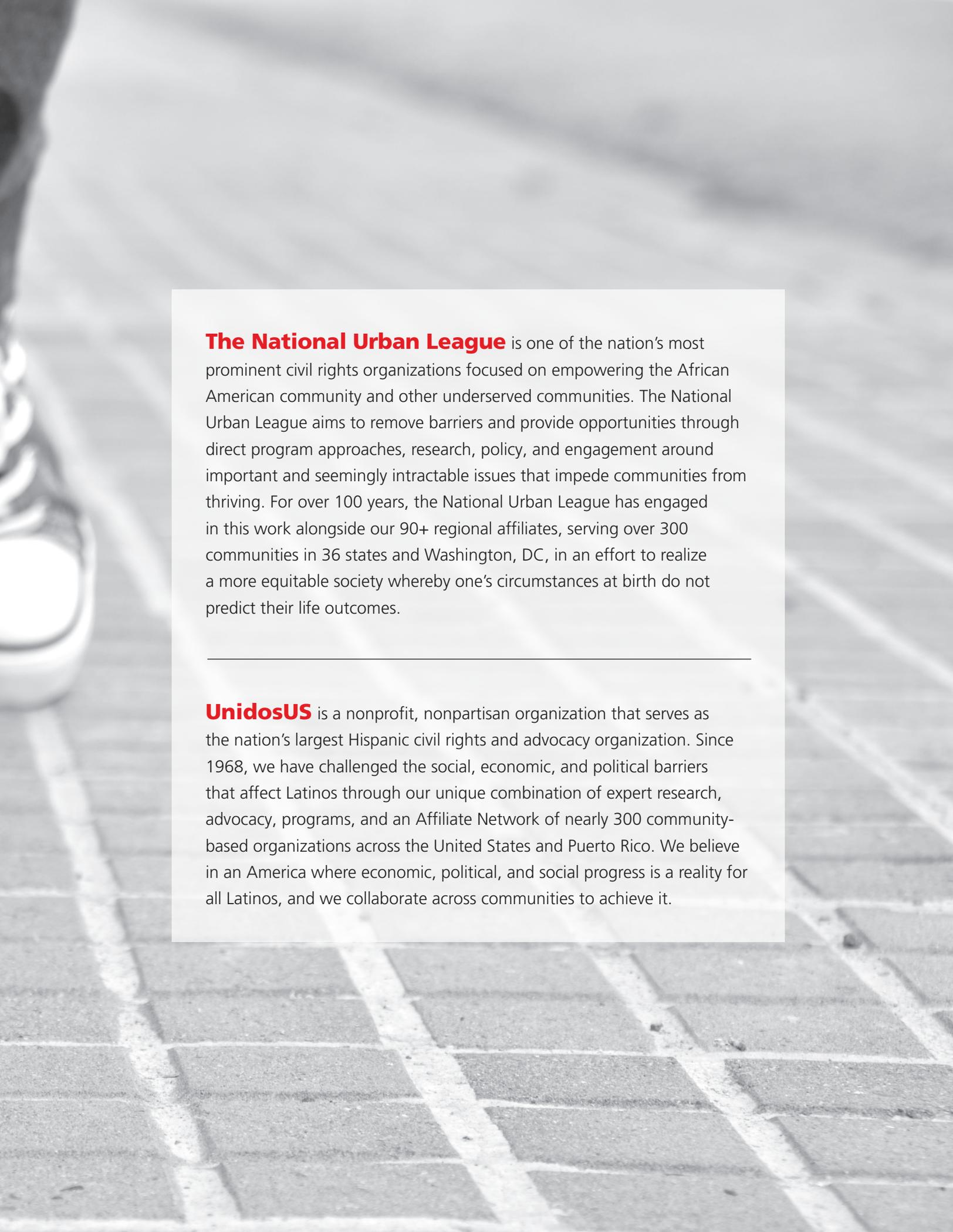
STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.



A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO

CAREER PATHWAYS NAVIGATION





The National Urban League is one of the nation's most prominent civil rights organizations focused on empowering the African American community and other underserved communities. The National Urban League aims to remove barriers and provide opportunities through direct program approaches, research, policy, and engagement around important and seemingly intractable issues that impede communities from thriving. For over 100 years, the National Urban League has engaged in this work alongside our 90+ regional affiliates, serving over 300 communities in 36 states and Washington, DC, in an effort to realize a more equitable society whereby one's circumstances at birth do not predict their life outcomes.

UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it.

PART I

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of education in the United States, **career pathways** are emerging as a transformative force for learners to navigate a future demanding a skilled and adaptable workforce.

Career pathways encompass a diverse range of programs from career and technical education (CTE), to early college initiatives that combine high school coursework with credit-bearing college coursework, to college and career readiness programs run by community-based organizations.

These holistic approaches bridge the gap between secondary education, postsecondary education, and real-world work experiences. Yet, many communities lack adequate pathways programs and pathways navigation support, leading to disparities in access and opportunities.

Career pathways act as a bridge between traditional education (high school and postsecondary education) and the workforce, offering learners valuable job skills and certifications. High-quality career pathways that lead to well-paying occupations are particularly beneficial for Black and Latino youth who face many obstacles in education and employment.



In their ideal form, these programs integrate rigorous academic instruction with career exploration, making learning relevant to workforce preparation and youth interest, and can provide a clear alternative road map for learners to navigate their educational journeys and career options.

If done right, by equipping Black and Latino learners with the necessary skills and guidance, career pathways can offer a critical path to economic mobility, breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and creating a more level playing field for communities from all backgrounds to succeed.

However, as we learned from a comprehensive literature review and series of listening sessions with 16- to 24-year-olds, there are considerable access gaps across pathways programs and insufficient support to help learners successfully identify, navigate, and complete a pathway program.

In this report, we discuss the central role that community-based organizations can play in supporting pathways navigation, highlighting CTE programs that youth of color have access to, and how they go about receiving information and guidance with regard to these programs.

Our vision for access to high-quality career pathways centers on navigators who aim to empower learners with key information and support they need to make informed decisions about their academic and career goals.

Our emphasis on in-field training, cultural and linguistic competence, and meaningful relationship-building underscores our commitment to the

science of learning and development, and equity and efficiency in supporting learners from all backgrounds (*The Science of Learning & Development, 2019*).

Research has shown that early exposure to career options is crucial in developing learners' interests and aspirations. However, many Black, Latino, and low-income learners lack access to high-quality opportunities to gain that exposure and to acquire the credentials necessary to be competitive in our nation's economy (*Lent et al., 1994; Increasing Opportunities for Black Learners, 2020*).

To address these challenges, the National Urban League and UnidosUS propose investing in and scaling a community-based pathways navigation model. Through specialized funding mechanisms, such as community block grants, organizations that serve underrepresented communities can pilot, evaluate, and grow federal pathways navigation initiatives, ensuring more equitable access to opportunities for workforce advancement.

By empowering learners to explore diverse career options and navigate educational pathways effectively, we can build a skilled and adaptive workforce that reflects the diversity and delivers on the potential of our nation to produce a highly competitive labor force.

In this report, we also discuss challenges posed by the current system of federal funding models and supports, demonstrating why a pathways navigator model can leverage assets already available in communities to address the needs of Black and Latino youth in acquiring the necessary education and skills to be competitive in the labor market. Finally, we provide federal policy recommendations to support this model and create a more accessible and effective career pathways navigation system.

PART II

Pathways Navigation: A Model for Equitable Career Opportunities & Outcomes

The existing approach to administering federally funded youth pathways is segmented and fraught with inconsistent levels of quality, recruitment and retention strategies, transition procedures, and support systems that account for learners' various social, emotional, and economic profiles (Graziano & Lee, 2024).



Institutions and organizations that manage these programs often do so with a patchwork of financial, operational, and administrative resources, making it challenging to provide learners with the holistic support needed for quality and meaningful pathways experiences.

To provide insight into the lived experiences of Latino students in relation to CTE programs, this year UnidosUS conducted a series of seven focus groups with youth ages 16-24 receiving services from community-based affiliates in California, Ohio, Missouri, New York, and Texas. Some students were enrolled in CTE programs and others were not, but one key finding that stood out across the board was that most participants obtained information about career pathways overwhelmingly through their own informal efforts, such as online research, familial sources, and life circumstances, each of which can contribute to limited awareness of CTE programs and pathways and contribute to disparities in access. For example, one student stated: "I'm doing the auto mechanic program because my family's cars are always breaking down. It would be beneficial to my family because I could fix their cars and they won't have to pay for services."

Without structured guidance, students may not receive comprehensive, accurate, or relevant information about pathways opportunities.

It is our recommendation to reimagine and restructure pathways programs to feature a centralized program institution that we are calling Pathway Navigators. The Pathway Navigator will act as a central hub to ensure consistent program quality, efficient use of resources, and equitable opportunities to learners throughout the system.

Pathway Navigators

Similar to career one-stop facilities, Pathway Navigators would exist as a central hub of resources related to career exploration, training, and jobs. Uniquely, pathway hubs will incorporate a holistic approach that acknowledges and addresses health, justice involvement, housing,

and other socio-economic factors that may impede individuals from accessing pathway programs. This strategy would help to eliminate some of the key barriers to participation, giving learners a better opportunity to succeed. The hubs will have key staff—navigators—similar to caseworkers, who are assigned to monitor and guide a learner's progression through the pathway. A learner's navigator will partner with other stakeholders such as school counselors, employers, medical professionals, the justice system, and various social service agencies to develop a broad all-encompassing plan for learners.

Pathway Navigators would be committed to removing barriers to participation and enhancing the learner's experience by acting as their individual coach and advocate. They would track learners from enrollment to completion, coordinating needed support services, connecting them to training opportunities and work experiences, and serving as liaisons between learners and other agencies.

Target Users

The pathways programming we recommend would focus on youth and young adults ages 16-24. This would include individuals enrolled in both traditional and non-traditional educational systems, youth impacted by the justice system, differently abled individuals, undocumented individuals, and youth in foster care.

Staffing & Resources

Numerous staff and human resources are needed to execute an effective youth pathways program including but not limited to:

- » Navigators
- » Teachers & professors
- » Guidance counselors & career services departments
- » Public & private business leaders
- » Public health officials
- » Political leaders
- » Social service administrators

Recruitment & Screening

Pathways programming must have uniform and inclusive recruitment and screening procedures to allow for equitable participation.

Ideally, participants would automatically be opted into a pathways program once enrolled in middle or high school. This would help eliminate barriers to entry and account for learners from all socio-economic backgrounds.

This model would also eliminate the need for expensive recruitment campaigns. The program would be viewed as part of the curriculum, not an extracurricular activity. This approach allows pathways programming to integrate seamlessly with the K-12 educational system; it wouldn't have the perception of being an additional program for "gifted and talented" or beholden to some other subjective screening process (Grissom & Redding, 2015).

Screening should focus on assessing the learner's needs, experience, skills, and interests. This would be the basis of an individual development plan that informs and wraps around services and training. Assessment should occur multiple times along the learner's journey and be steeped in social-emotional developmental values. The assessments must also be interactive, with learners as active participants, demonstrating skill acquisition as they progress through pathways.

Participant Supports

1 Administrative + Operational: This should be centralized in a designated state institution, similar to local one-stop workforce centers, not schools. Removing this process away from schools allows for a more equitable experience across the population of learners because the school's resources and capacity will not influence the program's operation or quality.

2 Social Services: Learners should have access to an array of integrated supports that work in coordination to provide them with the best experience possible. This includes health (physical and mental) resources, housing and transportation assistance, and financial aid to

help remove barriers to full participation and completion of the program.

3 Workforce: Mentors from a variety of industries would support learners, providing insight, guidance, and exposure to careers. Subsidies would be made available to learners for program training fees, supplies, and placement into appropriate work experiences such as work-study, internships, volunteer opportunities, and job opportunities.

4 Educational: Learners' academic goals would be supported by tutors equipped with the necessary training and dispositions. Traditional and specialized support for learners who may have been disconnected from the school system would be central to ensuring equitable access to Pathways Navigators, as well as targeted support for multilingual learners, neurodivergent learners, and others in need of specialized services. Learners would also have access to SAT and ACT test prep and technology supports, including broadband access.

Participant Transitions

Learners will be assessed at multiple points during their pathway journey, which will trigger transitions into new phases of the program. Most of these transitions would coincide with traditional school transitions such as graduation, but would also include other learning milestones such as an industry certification.

A whole-learner approach necessitates that we monitor, address, and support learners through key events that impact the learner's life, including a traumatic experience, changing schools, moving to a new state, and completion of a work experience.

Across the following three parts of this report we discuss the need for the Pathways Navigators model to center national organizations, like the National Urban League and UnidosUS, that can connect and leverage networks of community-based affiliates. In Part VI we describe the central role of the navigator in the Pathway Navigators model.

PART III

Shifting Demographics & Historical Challenges

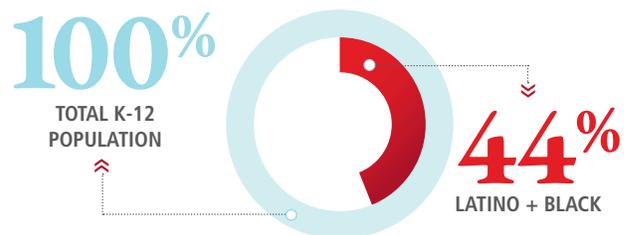
The need for an approach to accessing and completing pathways programs that are reflective of racial and ethnic diversities and responsive to cultural and linguistic differences is essential as we navigate the complexities of our educational system and changing demographics of the future workforce.

It is necessary to recognize the profound impact that accessible, affordable, and high-quality pathways programs can have for upward mobility, particularly for Black and Latino individuals.

A report by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce stated that by 2031, 72% of jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education and/or training (*After Everything, 2024*). By integrating academic coursework with career exploration and skills development, career pathways can expand opportunities for Black and Latino learners to pursue college degrees and/or industry certifications in fields aligned with their interests and talents. Furthermore, these programs equip learners with valuable technical skills and industry certifications, opening doors to high-demand jobs that offer strong earning potential.

A demographic shift is undergoing in the United States as the Latino population is projected to double by 2050, becoming the largest ethnic population in the country. By 2030, one in three learners in schools will be Latino, underlining the critical role that Latinos will play in shaping the nation's economic future. Despite these demographic gains, the Latino community faces significant barriers to socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, and the realization of its full potential.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), of the total K-12 student population across public schools in the United States, 29% are Latino and 15% are Black.



NECS, 2023

The Black community in the United States has historically faced significant barriers in accessing opportunities to economic success. Despite a growing need for skilled workers in various trades, Black learners are often underrepresented in pathways programs. This lack of access creates a significant barrier to achieving economic parity and limits career opportunities and upward mobility for communities of color. Addressing these disparities and ensuring equitable access to high-quality pathways programs is crucial for empowering the communities we represent and preparing them for fulfilling careers that lead to economic self-sufficiency in the ever-evolving job market.

PART IV

The Economic Imperative For Equitable Pathways Programs

The vast racial wealth gap in the United States significantly impacts Black and Latino families, limiting their access to educational opportunities.

A 2023 report on median household wealth by the Pew Research Center highlights the following disparity:

Median Household Wealth



This economic disadvantage is a major barrier to the availability of opportunities to acquire postsecondary credentials (e.g., a bachelor's degree), and therefore limits generational wealth-building for Black and Latino populations in the United States. These alarming figures underscore the limited opportunities faced by many Black and Latino families, impacting not only their current livelihoods but also the educational and career prospects of their children.

It is a myth that upward socio-economic mobility is the standard in the United States.

In fact, in the United States, socio-economic mobility remains woefully behind other comparable nations.

In 2020, the World Economic Forum published data on social mobility for 82 nations, showing that the United States ranked 27th. The data included five determinants including education, workforce, health, technology, and institutions.

When looking specifically at wealth mobility—the degree to which an individual or family can gain or lose wealth—data indicates that in the United States, people are unlikely to move up from one wealth quintile to the next (Shiro et al., 2022). Individuals in the lowest quintile currently have only a 5% chance of moving into the highest quintile. Additionally, 49% of people in the United States who are in the lowest wealth quintile in their early 30s are still there in their early 50s, showing that wealth mobility in the United States is quite low.

The data on wealth mobility is especially troubling when we look at differences across race and ethnicity. In their article, citing data from the Federal Reserve's Survey of Consumer Finances, Perry et al., (2024) highlight that Black people living in the United States, on average, have seen only modest increases in wealth over the past few years. Furthermore, the racial wealth gap continues to increase and is compounded by societal factors that make it more difficult for Black families to build wealth intergenerationally. In their recent groundbreaking work, Chetty et al., (2020) found that given the current structure of our society, intergenerational wealth building is decidedly less likely for Black families than white families. The authors—debunking racist theories

on white intellectual superiority—go on to show that differences in ability do not explain the vast inequality in wealth, but rather that the design of our institutions and our communities have created such a wide gap.

“Centuries of discrimination in public policy, financial practices, and societal norms that limited Black wealth accumulation have not been overcome and will require broad structural changes to rectify the long-lasting impact of inequality” (Perry et al., 2024).

While the accumulation of wealth is related to multiple factors both inside and outside of the economic system, income remains a primary driver. Unfortunately, data on income inequality (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>) in the United States closely mirrors that of wealth inequality. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that the United States lags far behind many other countries in terms of income equality.

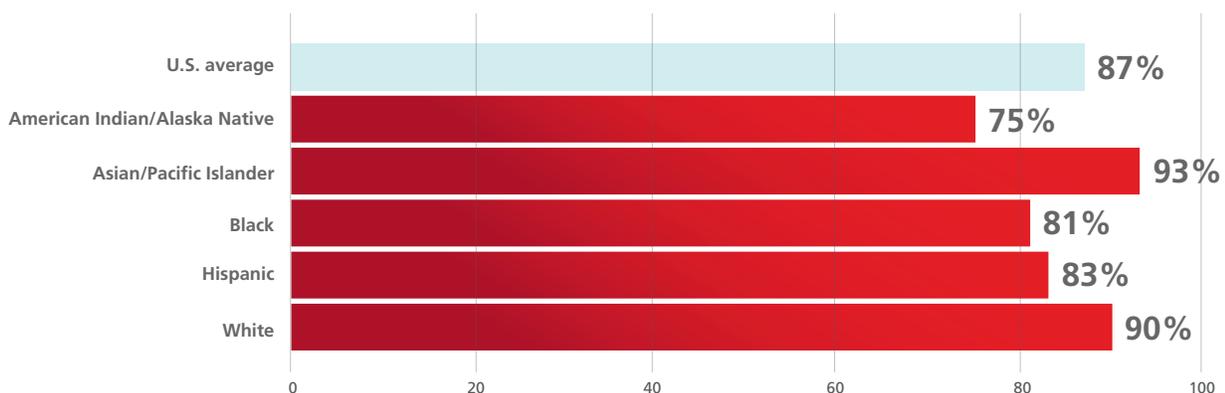
Again, race and income in the United States find themselves highly correlated where in 2022 over a third of Black households and 27% Hispanic households in the United States earned less than \$35,000, compared to only 21% for white households. Given the vast literature on wealth and income inequality, it is imperative that we address

barriers to economic mobility, especially for Black and Hispanic people living in the United States.

Earning a college degree or postsecondary certificate remains a key to economic power and mobility in the United States. Data from the Bureau of Labor statistics shows that in Q3 of 2023 median weekly earnings for an adult over the age of 25 without a high school diploma was \$721. Those who had a high school diploma earned \$905 on average, and for workers with some college or an associate degree, weekly earnings averaged \$1,012. Postsecondary credentials other than a college degree exist that also confer financial benefits. For example, an individual may acquire an industry-certified certificate in industrial welding or cybersecurity, which may be required for employment and also signals to prospective employers that the individual has the necessary training to be effective in the desired role.

Across our country, too many people fail to acquire the credentials necessary to enable upward economic mobility. While on-time high school graduation rates have continued to rise, from 79% in 2010-2011, to 87% in 2019-2020, meaningful gaps still exist. The bar graph below depicts the on-time graduation rate (adjusted cohort graduation rate [ACGR]) for the 2019-2020 school year. Hispanic and Black learners still lag behind their white (90%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (93%) peers with graduation rates of 83% and 81%, respectively (Condition of Education, 2023). Nearly 20% of Black and Hispanic youth do not graduate from high school on time, limiting their earning potential.

2019-20 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for Public High School Students by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Report on the Condition of Education, 2023

When looking at college degree holders, the issue of degree attainment compounds. According to data from the U.S. Census, 39.5% of non-Hispanic white adults, age 25 or older, have a bachelor's degree compared to only 20.4% for Hispanic adults. Black learners also find themselves disproportionately underrepresented among degree holders (27.6%), hindering their access to fulfilling careers in an evolving job market.

Given these disparities, policies, strategies, and practices intended to support credential and degree attainment must be addressed through an equity lens in order for our country to meaningfully address lack of educational opportunities for economic mobility.

Career pathways navigation represents a challenge and an opportunity to close racial/ethnic gaps in postsecondary credential attainment and lifetime earnings.

This was evident in the student focus groups conducted by UnidosUS. Because not all students were familiar with CTE programs, participants were asked about their perceptions of "good" and "bad" jobs. Students named a total of 10 general fields that they perceive as "good" to work in, such as STEM, medical, business

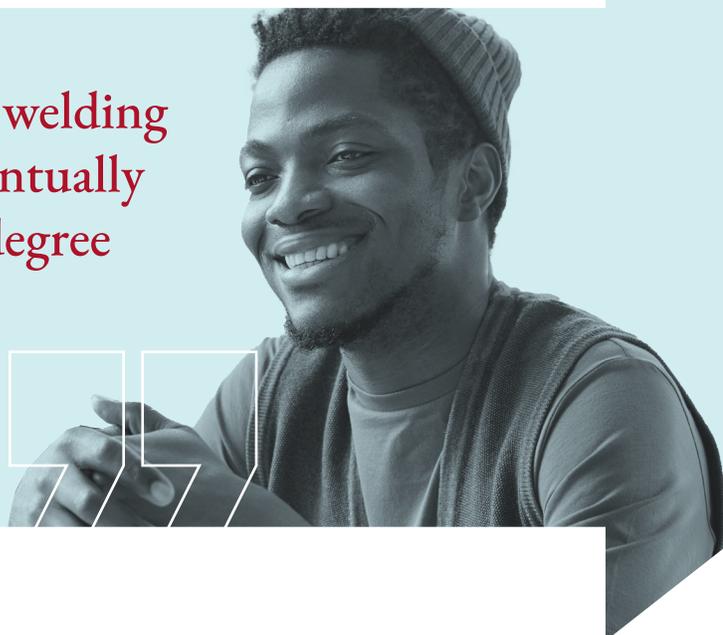
ownership, law enforcement, journalism/writing, healthcare, real estate, IT, carpentry, and the military. Coincidentally, these fields all have pathways programs and models. However, as previously mentioned, many students either were not aware of or did not have access to relevant programs.

On the other hand, when students were asked what they considered to be "bad" jobs or careers, 23.5% of students specifically named jobs associated with CTE pathways, such as factory work, childcare, construction, hospitality industry work, HVAC tech work, and welding. A takeaway from these responses is that most students had not been exposed to the long-term career possibilities CTE programs can offer or the potential salaries associated with said careers. For the students enrolled in high school CTE programs, many of them acknowledged that while they do want to work in their chosen field, they are interested in pursuing a four-year degree because of the expanded opportunities it can provide.

Career pathways navigation can help demystify perceptions of "good" and "bad" jobs by exposing students to postsecondary and career information and avenues.

I want to continue to do welding after high school and eventually I want to get a business degree and have a business."

- Student focus group participant



PART V

The Impact Of Systemic Barriers On Black & Latino Students

To ensure equitable opportunities for Black and Latino learners in education and career pathways, we must confront the systemic barriers that impede their access to traditional and alternative postsecondary opportunities.

A 2018 report by the Center for American Progress Action Fund, *Beyond Tuition*, which embodies the idea that education beyond high school is a civil right, sheds light on the factors that contribute to inequality in primary and secondary schools, such as gaps in funding, lack of access to high-quality teachers, and erosion of public support for education, which have undermined opportunities to serve students of color and low-income students well.

To address challenges facing Black and Latino learners, it is imperative to the success of Black and Latino learners to recognize the significance of intentionally creating pathways with robust navigational support. Pathways programs serve as a bridge between academic learning and practical skills, providing learners an array of learning opportunities and employment prospects.

However, despite the promise of pathways programs, there are persistent disparities in enrollment, course quality, and inclusivity, particularly among underprivileged learners.

These disparities extend to instructor diversity and completion rates in career pathway programs, further exacerbating the hurdles faced by Black and Latino learners in accessing equitable educational opportunities.

The economic benefits of closing the opportunity gap via the Pathways Navigator model extend beyond individual success, impacting national productivity. Studies by Citigroup and the Economic Policy Institute demonstrate the significant losses for the nation incurred due to discrimination in education and employment (Mora, T. & Davila, A. (2018); Akala, A. (2020)).

According to Citigroup, this impact has resulted in losses of over \$16 trillion in the U.S. economy over the last 20 years.



\$16 TRILLION

These losses encompass missed opportunities for Black people and Latinos in the United States due to income disparities resulting from wage gaps and discrimination in higher education access, among other factors. By empowering Black and Latino learners with relevant skills through improved pathways programs, we can unlock their potential and contribute to the overall prosperity of the nation.

PART VI

Pathways Navigators: An Essential Role for Program Success

We envision a robust, accessible system of trained, knowledgeable navigators that centers learners and provides individualized support, resources, and linkages to experiential opportunities.

The role of the community navigator undergirds this model. Through a set of functions, competencies, and continuous learning opportunities, the federal government can ensure standardization that would replace the current patchwork of programs and projects aimed at supporting learners aged 16-24.

Standardization would allow learners to be mobile and access the same quality of support regardless of geography.

While the navigator title is not new, our vision leverages what works from other sectors. In



healthcare, navigators are trained to help people access the best coverage for their needs by presenting options in an unbiased way and answering questions that empower people to make informed decisions. During the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, navigators were an essential component of enrollment increases.

“More than 1,500 certified Navigators held more than 1,800 outreach and education events at accessible areas—such as local libraries, vaccination clinics, food drives, county fairs, and job fairs. This historic investment in outreach and enrollment efforts helped contribute to the record-breaking 14.5 million people who signed up for 2022 healthcare coverage through the Marketplaces, including nearly 6 million people who newly gained coverage” (Sewell, 2022).

In 2021, the U.S. Small Business Administration launched a community navigator pilot to connect entrepreneurs to financial assistance and access to capital, procurement, and contracting during the Covid-19 pandemic economic recovery. The community navigators provided “targeted outreach” for small businesses in underserved communities. The navigators are “culturally knowledgeable local groups and individuals” with long-standing community relationships and are considered trusted messengers.

The existing navigator examples highlight the need for in-field training, cultural competence, relationship-building, and trusted messaging. Applying these principles to pathways programs represents a coordinated effort to support learners by centering their aspirations, identifying their skills, assets, and challenges, and equipping them with the knowledge and information to set and achieve academic, workforce, and other credentialing goals.

The lack of investment in pathways navigational support has contributed to a lack of equity and efficiency to assist youth from marginalized communities in navigating career pathways and negatively impacts our nation’s ability to generate a skilled, adaptive workforce. Having prior knowledge about a career is instrumental in developing an interest in that career (Sampson et al., 1999). Therefore, it is important that learners have access to a system of formal and structured guidance facilitating the exploration of career options they may not have previously known about.

In many communities across the country, career pathways navigation support is nonexistent or, when available, lacks appropriate design and investment to ensure that students and families are aware of and can take advantage of these opportunities. For example, 38 states have policies requiring that all high school students have an



Individualized Career and Academic Plan (ICAP), but mandates, requirements, and funding to drive effective implementation are inadequate. Also, there are opportunity youth—youth between 16 and 24 who are neither employed nor enrolled in school who face barriers to accessible jobs—veterans and returning citizens between the ages of 16-24 who are not enrolled in formal education but still deserve and need access to opportunities for advancement and family-sustaining income.

The pathways navigators would ideally be community-based to support all learners. We envision access to specialized funding through mechanisms such as community block grants. Entities like the National Urban League and UnidosUS, with their rich histories of direct service provision to underserved communities across their vast affiliate networks, are primed to pilot a federal pathways navigation program. These organizations are adept at successful outreach to “hard-to-reach” populations and have a track record of strong program implementation and excellent participant outcomes.

Throughout their history, the National Urban League and UnidosUS have engaged in authentic collaborations to address disparities impacting communities of color.

Regarding career pathways, UnidosUS has taken proactive steps to empower youth through its Escalera program, which serves 9th- to 12th-grade Latino learners that reside in underserved and disenfranchised communities and promotes economic mobility for Latino youth by increasing educational attainment, career planning, and access to information about advanced careers pathways. This program provides UnidosUS affiliates with culturally affirming curriculum (six core lessons per grade level with supplemental lessons available according to student need), advising (one-on-one mentorship) and experiential learning activities (college tours and job site visits) to promote educational attainment, career planning, and access to postsecondary opportunities.

In 2021, the National Urban League’s Workforce Development Division was awarded a \$5M grant from the Department of Labor’s Education and Training Workforce Pathways for Youth Grant Program to develop programming that would expand and increase alignment between workforce and Out-of-School Time (OST) programs for youth and disconnected youth. In the two and a half years since it was granted the award, NUL through its Urban Youth Pathways program, has enrolled over 1,300 youth into their OST youth workforce programs across 13 NUL affiliates. These youth have participated in over 3,000 different work experiences and occupational skill training opportunities. These experiences include part-time and full-time employment, internships, behind the business tours, career focused volunteer opportunities and classroom style learning in disciplines such as cybersecurity and automotive repair, designed to help them explore an array of career pathways. Of these 1,300+ youth, approximately 300 are considered disconnected youth, with 90% of participants identifying as Black or Latino. Increased federal funding earmarked specifically for community-based organizations allowed OST programs to expand and diversify offerings to learners, especially those on the cusp of graduating high school. With this funding, affiliates were able to leverage funders who were interested in youth programming but did not fit into traditional educational programming. These examples highlight the unique ability of community-based organizations to reach and support traditionally underserved communities and individuals.

Using a case management approach that is part workforce developer and part career counselor, a team of navigators can employ successful tactics like intrusive advising—a proactive advising approach—to maintain relationships and communication with participants and facilitate smooth transitions through individualized pathways for learners. The team approach also allows navigators to deepen their knowledge base and develop specialties to provide learners with dynamic support and external referrals when required.

PART VII

The Federal Role In Career Pathways

+ Our recommendations to improve development & support

Currently, pathways programs are funded through federal sources including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Perkins, Higher Education Act (HEA), and various federal departments. Fragmentation and lack of cohesion make it difficult to align the work and maximize impact across sectors. This has resulted in duplication of effort, differing and burdensome reporting requirements and use of funds restrictions, and often frustrating experiences for learners.

One such example is the 2016 Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, which is comprised of 25 federal departments and agencies. The working group developed a strategic plan, entitled *Pathways for Youth*, that identifies three primary goals:

- » **Collaborate to coordinate** strategies across federal departments to improve youth outcomes
- » **Promote the use of evidence-based and innovative strategies** at the federal, state, local, and tribal levels
- » **Foster youth engagement and partnerships** to strengthen programs and benefit youth

Nearly 10 years later, significant progress in the group's three goals have yet to be realized. There is still a long way to go to provide robust funding, coherent strategy, and a federal framework to unify career pathways systems.

In 2023, the U.S. Department of Labor announced The Youth Employment Works strategy, which centers on three goals:

- » **Ensuring the workforce system offers seamless access to job opportunities** and supportive services for young people entering the labor force from all pathways
- » **Encouraging partners** across all public and private sectors to invest in workforce training and job services for all young people
- » **Guaranteeing all young people, especially opportunity youth, have access to paid work experiences** aligned with high-quality career pathways that are safe and age appropriate

While these goals are commendable, without significant investment to implement this strategy, needed change remains elusive.



A Challenge Is the Rigidity in Federal Definitions That Can Result in Limiting Eligibility for Learners due to Unmet Criteria:

For example, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) has urged the federal government to define youth apprenticeship and youth apprentices. The coalition and our organizations believe youth apprenticeship should be registered in accordance with the National Apprenticeship Act and aligned with WIOA terms and concepts. Likewise, NYEC advocates that youth apprentices should be defined as any young person aged 16-24. All young people should have access to youth apprenticeship. If further narrowing is needed to elevate support for young people with the greatest need for resources, those who are out of school and out of work (opportunity youth) or the WIOA-Defined Out-of-School Youth population should be prioritized.

Over the years, the federal government has made efforts to understand and address the need for

career pathways through agency working groups or grantmaking opportunities. However, these undertakings have not meaningfully addressed navigational supports for learners. Additionally, restricted use of funding by source has created unnecessary bureaucracy for providers who are unable to blend funds, which can result in obstacles for learners.

For example, many affiliates in the National Urban League's Urban Youth Pathways portfolio also operated Project Ready, NUL's signature college and career readiness program funded by the Department of Justice, among others. Stringent guidelines around the use of funds and reporting made it difficult to fully integrate *Project Ready* and Urban Youth Pathways. A unified funding source with integrated program metrics and reporting mechanisms would allow for enhanced, efficient programming undergirded by richer data that drives continuous improvement.



The navigation system we envision must be agile and portable and allow for funding flexibility that can move with the learner.

Therefore, in any federal pathways policy there must be explicit funding to build and sustain navigational infrastructure. Navigational support is central to success, creating alignment, increased accessibility, and enabling a learner-centered approach to career pathways programs. The following are recommendations to improve the current federal models:

1 Increase and Leverage CTE Funding to Strengthen Navigation

A significant and more targeted increase in overall CTE funding is crucial to bolster navigation within existing programs and expand access to career advising. Congress should allocate more dedicated funding for CTE programs, exceeding the President's FY25 budget request of \$1.5 billion and prioritize the following:

Target Perkins V Funding to Close Equity Gaps:

- » Perkins V (formally Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act) aims to improve the academic and technical achievement of CTE students, strengthen connections between secondary and postsecondary education, and improve accountability.
- » Congress should allocate a larger share of Perkins V to support CTE pathways navigation in high schools that serve a high concentration of underserved, low-income students, and English learners. Targeted funding within Perkins V, combined with the overall funding increase, provides a multipronged approach to address historical underinvestment in CTE programs serving Black and Latino students who are overrepresented in less resourced schools. Focusing on navigation support to address access and completion disparities can help close existing gaps in CTE pathways.

Expand Career-Connected High School Program:

- » The purpose of this new federal grant program is to identify, support, and rigorously evaluate evidence-based and innovative strategies and activities to improve and modernize pathways between K-12, higher education institutions, and employers to ensure workforce alignment across sectors. One of the four evidence-based strategies to unlock career success under this grant is career guidance and navigation systems, which provides an opportunity to invest in the navigator model we envision.
- » Congress should make this grant program permanent and substantially increase its funding beyond the proposed \$57 million in the President's FY25 budget. This would help to expand access to high-quality, industry-aligned programs by bolstering career coaching and advising in under-resourced high schools where Latino and Black students are overrepresented.
- » The federal government should establish state matching grants that incentivize states to invest in pathways navigation programs and create long-term funding sustainability.

2 Expand and Strengthen Federal Data Collection and Reporting

Disaggregate More Data in the Consolidated Annual Report (CAR):

- » Under Perkins V, eligible agencies must submit annual reports to the U.S. Department of Education. The Consolidated Annual Report (CAR) acts as a mechanism for tracking the performance and effectiveness of federally funded CTE programs. The CAR helps ensure that CTE programs are adhering to federal regulations established by Perkins V and other relevant legislation.

- » The Department of Education should revise the CAR data collection format to include disaggregated data within the CAR on student race and ethnicity and English proficiency in pathways programs. This would enable the Department of Education to capture and report a more comprehensive analysis of participation and achievement gaps to inform pathways policy. Having a more robust set of data can also help to identify and track trends in navigation supports to complement other research.

Leverage Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) to Identify and Address Barriers:

- » The Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) was established in 1975 to collect issue-oriented data quickly and with minimum response burden. The FRSS surveys are designed to meet the data needs of the U.S. Department of Education to provide an expeditious picture of the national education landscape.
- » The surveys gather information from a nationally representative sample across various educational entities, including state and local education agencies, public and private elementary and secondary schools, teachers and principals, and public and school libraries.
- » The Department of Education should use FRSS data to pinpoint specific barriers that hinder underserved populations, including lack of navigation supports in pathways programs. This data can then be utilized by policymakers to develop targeted interventions at the federal, state, and local levels to address the identified barriers.

3 Provide Technical Assistance and Invest in Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practices

Invest in Community-Based Partnerships:

- » Federal agencies should invest in partnerships with organizations that have expertise in

cultural competency and language access in youth/young adult education and workforce programming to develop training materials and provide funding for implementation.

- » Agencies should also develop, gather, and disseminate resources and best practices for educators and practitioners to inform culturally responsive pathways programs that are more engaging and relevant for Black and Latino students.

Invest in Career Guidance and Mentorship Programs for Underserved Students:

- » Strong career guidance and mentorship provided by navigators that reflect the diversity of the communities they serve can help build trust, address information gaps, and empower students to make informed decisions about their career pathways.
- » The federal government should support career guidance initiatives for underserved populations, including Black and Latino students within pathways programs. This could involve connecting students with mentors from similar backgrounds who can provide career advice and support network building.

These policy recommendations aim to leverage existing federal mechanisms while focusing on specific actions related to funding allocation, data collection and reporting, program development, and support services that can help improve access and navigation of career pathways for Black and Latino students.

By taking these steps, policymakers can create a more equitable landscape for underserved students within pathways programs, empowering them to pursue fulfilling careers and achieve economic success.

PART VIII

Conclusion

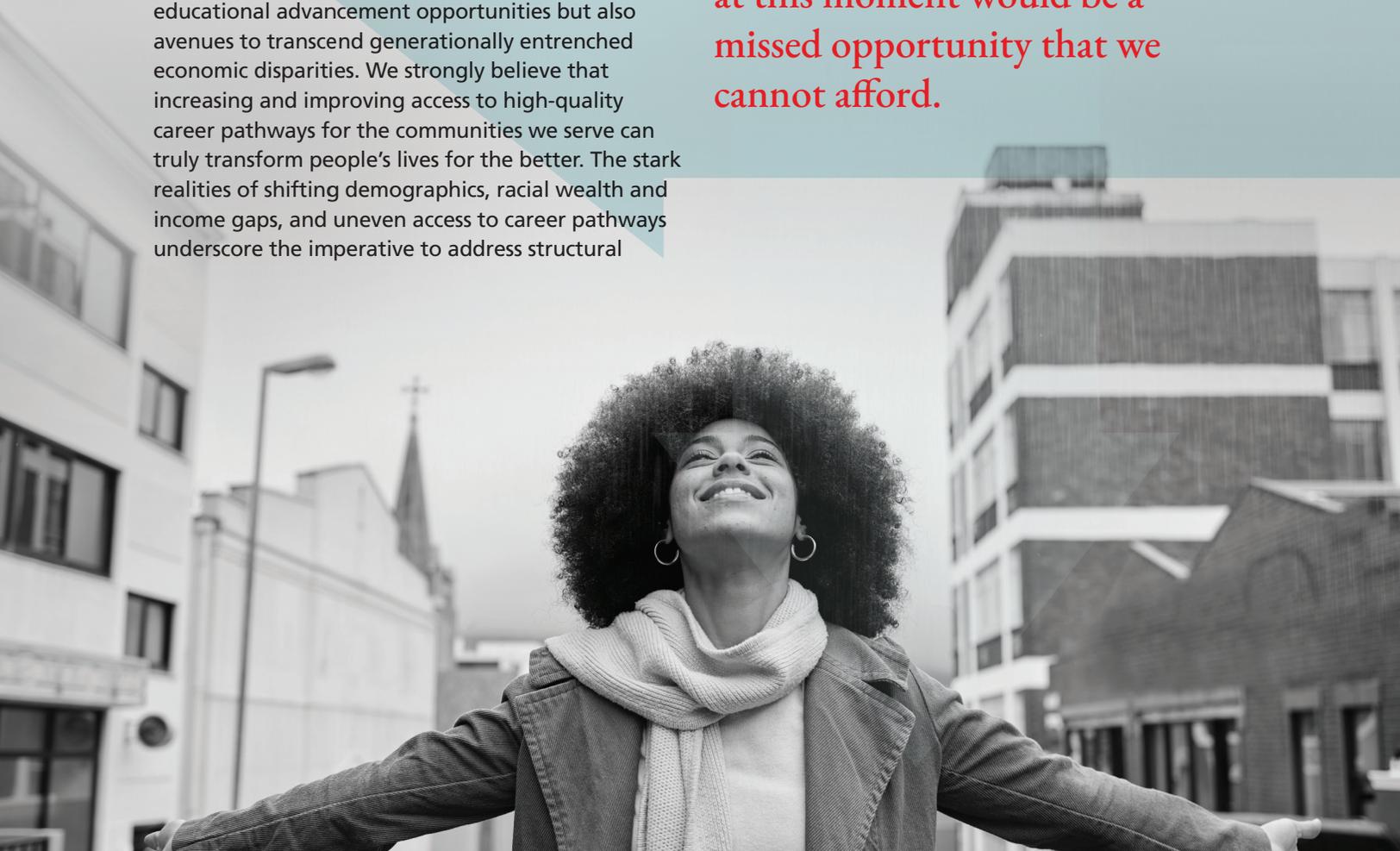
The promise of career pathways as a vehicle for social and economic mobility holds significant potential for students of color.

Central to realizing this promise is the pathways navigator model we have proposed in this paper. Navigators can be a positive force in breaking down systemic barriers and building toward a more inclusive and responsive pathways ecosystem for underserved students. By addressing the needs and recognizing the assets that these students bring to various learning environments, we can help provide the support that underserved communities have historically lacked in navigating career pathways.

If done right, a strong navigation approach within career pathways programs can lead to not only educational advancement opportunities but also avenues to transcend generationally entrenched economic disparities. We strongly believe that increasing and improving access to high-quality career pathways for the communities we serve can truly transform people's lives for the better. The stark realities of shifting demographics, racial wealth and income gaps, and uneven access to career pathways underscore the imperative to address structural

inequities embedded within our education and workforce systems. Expanding opportunities to learn and acquire the skills young people need to be successful also strengthens our nation's ability to develop the workforce that will secure our global competitiveness.

To fail to meet the challenge of reimagining pathways supports at this moment would be a missed opportunity that we cannot afford.



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