A recent report released by the McKinsey Center for Government highlights the growing challenge college graduates face in finding employment after graduation. “Education to Employment: Designing a System that Works,” details findings from an international examination of youth unemployment. Drawing from more than 100 education to employment initiatives in 25 countries, and survey data from more than 8,000 youth, education providers, and employers in nine countries, the report focuses on skill development, with emphasis on the mechanisms that connect education to employment. In-depth analysis is provided for nine countries: Brazil, Germany, India, Mexico, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The report not only provides details about the challenges young people and employers face, but offers best practices from case studies that work. The authors develop a framework for understanding the education to employment system. Consisting of three key intersections, the framework presents the education to employment pipeline as a complex system with multiple places to enter and exit. The three intersections are: 1) Enrollment in post-secondary education; 2) Building skills; and 3) Finding a job.

Intersection One: Enrollment

The enrollment intersection is characterized by two key decisions: choosing whether to enroll in post-secondary education and, if so, choosing what to study. In response to the first question, the authors find the reasons for choosing not to enroll in post-secondary education vary, though cost is a major factor for many students. Internationally, 31 percent of high school graduates indicate they did not continue their education because it was too expensive. This number jumps to 48 percent in the United States, the highest of all nine nations (p. 28). In addition, 20 percent indicate a need to work as the primary reason for not enrolling in school. Unfortunately, the financial benefits of postsecondary education are well documented: in the United States, the 2008 net value of post-secondary education was estimated at $329,552 (p. 30). While cost was found as the leading reason for not attending in the United States, other factors internationally include lack of interest (Saudi Arabia), uncertainty of economic return of education (Turkey), lack of
places to study (Germany), and doubt that further education will help secure a job (United Kingdom).

After deciding whether to continue with one’s education, the authors describe the decision of what to study and where as the next critical factor in the enrollment intersection. Unfortunately, many youth make poor decisions when it comes to deciding what to study. In particular, evidence suggests students are not adequately prepared to make the decision: fewer than half of those surveyed are confident they would choose the same course of study if they could do it again (p. 30). Youth across all countries also indicate not being well informed about the availability of jobs or the level of wages associated with their course of study, with 40 percent reporting they were not familiar with market conditions and requirements even for well-known professions such as teaching and medicine (p. 31).

Intersection Two: Skill Building

Once students make the decision to enroll in post-secondary education, two key questions must be answered: 1) What skills do students need; and 2) How should skills and training be delivered? Unfortunately, it is at this intersection where one begins to see a marked lack of communication and understanding across stakeholders. For instance, only 42 percent of employers believe their recent hires were adequately prepared by their pre-hire education for an entry-level position. Similarly, only 45 percent of youth felt they were adequately prepared for an entry-level position in their chosen career field. Despite this, some 72 percent of education providers believe their graduates are adequately prepared for an entry-level position (p. 39). Given this level of disconnect, it is not surprising those employers who report the best outcomes with regard to the preparedness of new workers are those that engage the most with education providers.

Another key gap in the skill-building intersection has to do with delivery of instruction. The authors find 58 percent of youth said practical, hands-on learning is an effective approach to training. Yet, only 24 percent of academic-program graduates and 37 percent of vocational-graduates indicate spending their time in this manner (p. 37).

Intersection Three: Finding Employment

The final intersection in the education to employment pipeline comes in finding employment. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2011, the unemployment rate for young people (aged 15 to 29) was 15 percent across more than 100 countries, three times the unemployment rate of those over 30. In addition, one in five unemployed young people in advanced economies have been seeking work for a year or more, a figure that rises to 30 percent in the euro area (p. 40).

From the perspective of young workers, the authors find of those with a job, 27 percent took more than six months to find their initial employment, and only 55 percent found work relevant to their field of study. Indeed, 25 percent of respondents were only able to find interim work (p. 41, 44). That is, jobs they plan to leave quickly that are unrelated to their field of study. Not surprisingly, only half of surveyed youth believe their post-secondary education had improved their chances of securing employment (p. 54).

For employers, nearly four in ten of those with vacancies report a primary reason behind those vacancies is a lack of the right skills in new graduates (45 percent of employers report this in the
United States.) (p. 44). Some 36 percent of employers also report this lack of skills caused “significant problems in terms of cost, quality, and time.” This shortage is so significant 70 percent of employers state they would pay significantly higher wages to get more qualified employees (p. 47).

From the educator perspective, knowledge of job placement does not appear a high priority. When asked, one-third of educators could not estimate the percentage of their graduates who found jobs, and many who guessed were wrong (p. 50). In fact, when asked to identify their priorities, helping students find employment ranked sixth out of ten (p. 53). These results suggest educators could pay more attention to what is for many students a key priority of pursuing education—getting a good job.

**Learning by Example: Stories of Success**

After detailing evidence of the education to employment gap, the authors cite seven best practices for supporting students. Drawn from their analysis of 100 of the most innovative and successful programs worldwide, the best practices include the following: 1) Improve access to career information; 2) Address social perceptions; 3) Make education more affordable; 4) Support students through college graduation; 5) Provide hands-on learning opportunities; 6) Improve communication between education stakeholders; and 7) Work with students earlier in the process.

1) Improve access to career information

The first characteristic of successful programs is they provide access to career information, including comprehensive data on job opportunities, wages, and training. The authors suggest more detailed and comprehensive information about various occupations needs to be made accessible. It is not enough, however, to simply make the information available. The authors find the most successful programs are those that target information to students and their families by, for instance, embedding career planning into the school curriculum. In Bern, Switzerland, for example, all students in seventh, eighth, and ninth grade are required to participate in career counseling that includes information about various careers, typical working hours and wages, as well as academic and vocational training paths. They also visit companies and prepare for interviews, often resulting in internship opportunities.

2) Address social perceptions

In thinking about job training, some 70 percent of respondents believe vocational training programs are more helpful for getting a job than academic programs, but 64 percent indicate academic programs are more valued by society (p. 31). Respondents were nearly split on which type of program they would prefer to enroll in, with 52 percent indicating vocational and 48 percent academic. Of the 52 percent who indicated they would prefer a vocational program, however, only 38 percent enrolled (p. 38). The authors highlight the need to reduce the stigma associated with vocational training. In particular, emphasis needs to be placed on undoing the perception that a four-year degree is the only option for securing a job with a good salary, and that skill-oriented jobs lack long-term prospects. Indeed, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the top 30 occupations with the largest projected growth to 2020, only four require bachelor’s degrees (p. 36).
3) Make education more affordable

Among the youth surveyed in the study, 31 percent cite cost and 20 percent cite the need to work as the primary reason for not enrolling in college (p. 64). Not surprinsing, the next recommendation is to make college more affordable. The authors highlight government programs in the United Kingdom and Australia, among others, that provide scholarships and subsidies for economically vulnerable students. Additionally, the authors suggest greater efforts on the part of employers to share the cost of education by investing in the training of future employees by paying a portion of tuition and guaranteeing job placement after graduation. Other suggestions include focusing on ways to reduce cost structure, from leveraging technology to hiring less experienced teachers and providing top-up training.

4) Support students through college graduation

Mirroring current trends in the United States, the authors find successful programs provide support to those students who are most vulnerable for not completing their education. Citing Year Up as a smaller-scale program finding success in supporting students, the authors find the combination of high expectations, strict accountability, and a comprehensive support network of peers, staff, professional mentors, social-service professionals, and community-based mentors provide the structure necessary for students to succeed. In terms of large-scale programs, the authors describe the intrusive advising model used at Miami Dade College, the largest campus-based community college in the United States with nearly 175,000 students. In this case, students are assigned an advisor who receives an automated alert when a student pulls a risk trigger, for instance by missing classes or falling grades. The advisor is then able to intervene and work to support the student back on track. The system appears to be working: despite an 87 percent minority, 72 percent “not college ready” student enrollment, 61 percent of Miami Dade College students graduate, more than twice the national average (p. 66).

5) Provide hands-on learning opportunities

The next step in bridging the education to employment pipeline comes by building youth skills through targeted instruction and hands-on learning opportunities. In their survey, 58 percent of youth said practical, hands-on learning is an effective approach to training, yet only 24 percent of academic-program graduates and 37 percent of vocational education graduates said they spent most of their time learning in this manner (p. 37). As such, it is important opportunities for internships and apprenticeships are made available to students. When not available, the authors laud programs that “bring the workplace to the classroom” through physical and computer/digital simulations as successful alternatives to internships and other workplace-based opportunities. In addition to providing internships and other hands-on learning opportunities, the authors find companies that are more successful in hiring qualified applicants are those that define the skills necessary for a particular position at a very precise level so they can be incorporated into instruction.

6) Improve communication between education stakeholders

Next, the authors highlight the need for better communication between all stakeholders. More specifically, employers need to be explicit in describing what they are looking for in a candidate, and work with education providers so they are better equipped to match students to jobs. Indeed, of the only 31 percent of surveyed employers who indicated being successful in finding the talent they need, they were all distinguished for regularly reaching out to education providers.
and youth, offering them time, skills, and money (p. 37). By comparison, one-third of employers indicate they never communicate with education providers; of those that do, fewer than half say it proved effective (p. 18). Furthermore, the authors find the most transformative programs and those with the greatest results are the ones that involve multiple providers and employers working collaboratively within a particular industry or function. Similarly, the authors find promise in credentialing and assessment programs, such as ACT’s WorldKeys® and Mozilla Open Badges, as a means of certifying a candidate’s skills, and encourage further development of these still new programs.

7) Work with students earlier in the process

The final recommendation is to treat the education to employment pipeline as an interdependent continuum, rather than the three distinct intersections of enrollment, skill building, and finding a job. By improving communication and interacting earlier in the process, educators and employers can be sure their goals are well aligned and students will be well prepared for employment in their chosen career field.
About The National Partnership for Educational Access

NPEA is a membership association that supports the quality, success, and growth of organizations working to expand educational opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students across the United States. Through professional development, collaboration, and the dissemination of best practices, NPEA is working toward the day when all students have equal access to high-quality education and opportunities for college and beyond.

NPEA is unique in two ways: first, our members serve students all along the continuum of grades, beginning in early elementary through high school and college. Second, the diverse membership provides a forum for sharing different perspectives and ideas in order to bolster the field of college access and close the achievement gap that prevents so many children from realizing the benefits of a college degree.

Lack of academic preparation, limited understanding of the complex college admission and financial aid application processes, and rising tuition costs combine to keep millions of capable yet underserved students locked out of the opportunities provided by a college education; at the same time, the demand for a college-educated workforce continues to grow. While many organizations exist to increase opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students, they often work in isolation, struggling with challenges that a program on the other side of the country or even around the corner has already solved. By bringing organizations together to build connections and share lessons learned, NPEA is strengthening the pipeline to college on a local and national scale.