

START, STAY, SUCCEED

A retrospective on New Jersey's progress toward a student-centered vision for higher education, through strategic collaboration between the state and institutions



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BRIEF 4 OF 4

Envisioning What's Next for Higher Education in New Jersey

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INTRODUCTION

New Jersey's colleges and universities have redefined what it means to deliver on the promise of higher education. Across our Start, Stay, Succeed retrospective series, we have focused on coordinated efforts to improve college access and affordability, center the whole student, and align the sector through stronger coordination and collaboration.

In the brief, *Advancing Opportunity through Greater College Affordability and Access*, staff contributors have highlighted programs addressing barriers to students starting and completing their higher education journeys. Efforts to mitigate barriers include initiatives such as the Community College Opportunity Grant and the Garden State Guarantee which have helped over 70,000 students access college at a free or reduced rate. These coordinated efforts across the state have led to the student share of higher education costs dropping to its lowest level in over a decade. In 2024, students and families were responsible for just 40% of total costs, down from a high of 58% in 2017.

In the brief, *Supporting the Whole Student to Achieve Success in College and Beyond*, staff contributors also discussed numerous efforts and approaches centering student wellbeing and wraparound support. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the State responded to the growing youth mental health crisis and student needs by distributing more than \$30 million directly to institutions. Since 2022, funding has allowed campuses to tailor their response directly to the needs of their unique student populations. Mental health remains a critical factor in college students' retention and related success with a recent Gallup finding that wellbeing is the top reason students consider leaving their programs. This funding empowers colleges and universities to bolster institutional and community response to student mental health challenges.

In the brief, *Coordinating a Diverse Higher Education Ecosystem to Meet Tomorrow's Needs*, staff contributors showcase how higher education in New Jersey has evolved to become more collaborative and transparent, enabling new approaches to address historical inequities and advance institutional innovation. Funding structures have presented challenges in recent years, with New Jersey ranking 13th for full-time-equivalent enrollment but among the bottom 10 states for appropriations and net tuition revenues. In response, the State has implemented a multi-faceted approach including fostering collaborative networks, adopting a data-driven senior public funding formula, and facilitating coordinated responses to urgent and emerging needs. The efforts by the state and our colleges and universities underscore New Jersey's commitment to strengthening our higher education ecosystem by fostering a shared responsibility for student and institutional success.

These instances are not isolated successes, but rather coordinated efforts of the New Jersey higher education ecosystem working to support the whole student. These initiatives are evidence of New Jersey's systems of higher education evolving to meet the needs of New Jersey residents and the State.



MEETING THE HIGHER ED MOMENT

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Now more than ever, New Jersey must synchronize education and workforce development to meet today's needs while preparing for tomorrow's demands. This connection must intentionally elevate and prioritize postsecondary education as a critical driver of the State's economic growth and long-term prosperity—a propensity dependent on producing graduates prepared for an economy where [68 percent of jobs by 2031](#) will require education beyond high school. New Jersey higher education must continue the momentum generated over the last eight years toward expanding pathways that link learning directly to workforce opportunities, preparing students for life-changing careers in New Jersey's dynamic economy.

Today's college students look vastly different from those of the past decades. Adult learners, those over 25 years old, now [make up](#) nearly a third of all enrolled college students nationally. But age is only part of the story: [more students are enrolling part-time](#) while balancing jobs and family responsibilities; first-generation students make up a growing share of the undergraduate population; and students from [racially and economically diverse backgrounds](#) are entering higher education in greater numbers. This changing landscape underscores the need for flexible, high-quality pathways that reflect the realities of students' lives and equip them to succeed in a rapidly evolving economy. This growing population underscores the need for flexible, high-quality pathways that allow working adults to reskill, upskill, and remain competitive in the labor market.

With [rapid growth in sectors](#) such as health care, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, and artificial intelligence, employers increasingly require workers with new technological competencies—from operating clean-energy systems and advanced manufacturing equipment to applying data analytics in health care and biotech research. These shifts are reshaping programmatic needs, demanding quicker adaptation from colleges and universities to align

credentials with the evolving requirements of the labor market. To meet these evolving demands, higher education and workforce development must forge closer integrated partnerships with industry.

One notable effort is exemplified by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority's (NJEDA) investment in [Strategic Innovation Centers](#) (SICs) which are public-private collaboration spaces offering research and development. A notable example is the [NJ Nokia Bell Labs Innovation Center and Venture Studio](#), a 13,500-square-foot facility in New Brunswick focused on AI, AI-informed communications, cloud computing, and optical/wireless networking technologies. The NJEDA is investing \$25 million (with \$10 million matched by Nokia) to equip startups emerging from local universities with lab space, business training, and strategic networks—all aimed at accelerating commercialization and job creation. These efforts also align with the recommendations of the [New Jersey Business & Industry Association's 2025 Blueprint for a Competitive New Jersey](#), which emphasizes that strengthening the talent pipeline through higher education and workforce partnerships is essential to maintaining the state's economic vitality. By coordinating initiatives across education and industry, graduates will be well-prepared for current job markets and equipped with the adaptability to succeed as industries continue to evolve.

From changing student demographics to an evolving workforce to mass advancement of technology, New Jersey has the opportunity—and the obligation—to our residents—to turn these insights into timely action. In order to meet this moment, New Jersey will require bold investment, deeper cross-sector collaboration, and a shared focus on innovation and equity. And if we are able to succeed, New Jersey will not simply respond to the change: we will lead it. Ensuring that every resident, regardless of background or circumstance, has access to education, skills, and opportunities needed to thrive in the new economy.

New Jersey's diverse higher education ecosystem has made significant progress, but meeting the challenges ahead requires us to go further together. The next stage of this work demands that every program, credential, and partnership be intentionally aligned to the realities facing today's students and the needs of tomorrow's workforce. This alignment cannot be achieved in silos. By working collaboratively—students, educators, employers, and policymakers alike—New Jersey can advance with a shared vision and renewed purpose. Sustaining momentum will require deepening cross-sector collaboration, accelerating innovation, and ensuring equity remains at the center of every decision. In doing so, the State can guarantee that every learner – whether entering college for the first time, returning to upskill, or pursuing a new career pathway – has the opportunity to succeed and contribute to New Jersey's economic and civic vitality.

OPPORTUNITIES THAT LIE AHEAD

- 1. Expand Flexible, Career-Aligned Pathways with a Focus on Regional Collaboration:** New Jersey has the opportunity to boost career-focused education through regional collaboration. By expanding stackable credentials and applied learning, institutions can ensure students gain relevant skills and progress more seamlessly along education and career pathways. [Stackable credentials](#) allow students to build upon shorter-term certificates or industry-recognized credentials as they advance toward higher degrees, creating flexible on- and off-ramps that make it easier for students to re-enter education as their goals or circumstances change. Similarly, applied learning – through internships, apprenticeships, and work-based projects – connects classroom instruction to real-world experience, giving students more immediate value in the labor market while enhancing long-term career mobility. Sharing services across regions and aligning programs with industry will improve efficiency and student mobility. Integrating applied learning opportunities within degree programs will equip graduates with both academic knowledge and job-ready skills. This collaborative approach not only generates cost savings but also positions higher education to meet emerging workforce needs effectively.
- 2. Harness Innovation to Power Workforce Readiness:** New Jersey must champion industry-aligned programming and bolster [workforce training centers](#) – such as those supported by NJEDA -- that serve as anchors for high-growth sectors. These hubs help bridge education with evolving workforce needs. In partnership with NJDOL, OSHE leads the New Jersey Career Accelerator Internship Grant Program (CAIGP) that has created over 1,700 paid internship opportunities since 2022 with about 130 New Jersey employers each summer. Relatedly, in 2023 NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development saw a 100 percent increase in [Registered Apprenticeship](#) programs across the State prior to 2018. This success demonstrates that deeper, formalized collaboration with industry can unlock new opportunities and accelerate student success.
- 3. Empowering Communities for Success:** New Jersey's higher education strategy must focus on creating pathways for success in opportunity zones – which includes regions where [educational attainment is below the current state average](#) – ensuring students from these areas can access, persist in, and complete their degrees. Increasing degree completion rates is paramount for economic vitality, as a highly skilled, career-ready workforce can adapt swiftly to evolving industry demands, drive innovation, and attract diverse business investments, ultimately fostering sustained economic growth and competitiveness. [RWJBarnabas Health](#) has leveraged the state's Community College Opportunity Grant to help income-eligible, in-state students pursue their first associate degree tuition-free at local community colleges. Eligible students can also transfer to a public, four-year New Jersey institution and receive additional tuition support through the Garden State Guarantee. The [alignment of education and industry partners](#) reinforces how strategic investments, especially in areas ripe with opportunity, create affordable, career-aligned pathways that connect students to higher education and the workforce.



LEADING THE NATION FORWARD

With its broad network of institutions, a vibrant and diverse student population, and a proven track record of turning vision into action, New Jersey is poised to lead the nation in defining the next era of postsecondary education. We are committed to giving light to a future where life-long learning is the pinnacle of student success and aspiration, where pathways from education to employment are clear and supported, and where opportunity is within reach for all.

As New Jersey evolves and responds to the increasingly complex higher education landscape, our state stands poised to forge a dynamic partnership between postsecondary education, industry, and government. Through building pathways that align education with workforce needs and economic goals, we are not just preparing students for future careers, we are cultivating the innovators, leaders, and skilled professionals who will drive our state's prosperity. Together, we will create a robust ecosystem where higher education catalyzes economic vitality, technological advancement, and social progress, securing New Jersey's competitive edge in the global economy for generations to come.

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