Preparing a Green + Blue Workforce


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Author's Note

Portions of this paper have been adapted from other works by the author and are cited throughout.

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Introduction

The transition to clean energy in the United States promises to create millions of new jobs over the coming decade. Research suggests clean energy technologies could create more than six million new jobs by 2035. Given that thousands of new jobs in the clean energy sector were already created in 2022 and 2023, it seems probable that these projections over the coming years may come true. Other jobs related to building a more sustainable economy are also already growing in fields as diverse as sustainable agriculture, transportation, buildings and architecture, green finance, and other fields. The growth of these fields is creating demand for skilled labor, and the ability to rapidly grow the green workforce could have significant consequences for the planet and for the American workforce as federal and state policies shift to provide substantial funding to combat climate change. The demand for green labor also provides a historic opportunity to more equitably include members of marginalized communities that have often been left out of economic opportunity and growth.

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While there is debate about what constitutes a green job, the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines green jobs as those that address either adaptation to or mitigation of climate change. These are jobs that do at least one of the following: produce goods and services that benefit the environment; preserve natural resources, make business processes more environmentally friendly, or reduce natural resource use. Other green jobs are those that help improve resilience to the effects of climate change. Broadly, adaptation and mitigation jobs focus on reducing or stopping the contributors to climate change, while resilience jobs focus on addressing and managing climate shocks. These jobs encompass both those that are emerging in response to climate change, as well as those that...
are “greening” in response to a clean energy transition—that is, existing jobs adapting to be more environmentally friendly. The first category of these might include jobs in new industries such as wind and solar energy, while the latter might include the reskilling of heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) workers to understand heat pump technology; mechanics who can service electric cars; or electricians who can work on all ends of a clean energy grid. But they also include jobs in areas as diverse as urban planning, landscape architecture, climate risk assessment, disaster management, public health, and justice. The myriad skills demanded by a labor market that is rapidly transitioning to using renewable sources of energy, developing more environmentally friendly products, and conducting business in ways that are less resource intensive while also responding to a more unpredictable and intense climate are changing the way work is done for both workers and employers.

Given the scope of jobs emerging across fields, while the demand for workers with green job skills is growing, educational institutions that contribute to the training of those workers have been slower to keep pace with the scope and level of demand in the multitude of industries that are at the heart of the clean energy transition. This may be because educational institutions face multiple barriers to rapidly changing or expanding curricular offerings. Some of these include bureaucratic processes that make it difficult to develop new career pathways and create new certifications for both students to earn in order to demonstrate their training and for teachers to be qualified to teach new subject matter. Other challenges include lack of alignment in goals and expectations between employers, who may be best positioned to help schools and colleges understand the in-demand skills they are looking for as they expand and hire, and schools and colleges that have other goals, such as student equity and support, as top priorities.¹

At the same time, failure to adequately ramp up education and training for jobs in the green labor market may mean that efforts to make these and other necessary changes to the way workers are trained could hamper the realization of policy targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by specific deadlines that rely on fundamental changes to energy use and infrastructure. For example, the Biden administration has pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2030. Reaching that goal will require massive changes to the kinds of energy the country uses for both its buildings and its transportation, how energy is stored and how efficiently energy is used, and to other systems that have direct implications for climate change, such as agriculture and land use. In addition, as the effects of climate change worsen, demand for other skills related to disaster management are also increasing. Ensuring these changes happen on a timeline that will meet emissions reduction targets requires a workforce with different skills and knowledge than the one we have now.

To that end, in response to both federal and state legislation designed to shift the economy toward a clean energy future as well as to increase the green workforce, there are starting to be initiatives and priorities established around supporting secondary career and technical education (CTE) programs, as well as community colleges to develop education and training programs specifically to support the growth and development of education and training for workers in the green and blue economies.

This paper provides an overview of the key federal and state legislation that supports the development of a green labor market. It then provides an overview of some of the programs that have begun to be developed at colleges and universities designed to support the education and training of workers for the green labor market, as well as some of the similar kinds of programs that are being implemented in the secondary education space; an overview of issues and barriers to expansion of these kinds of programs; and some promising evidence that may support the expansion of education and training for green jobs. This paper does not provide an exhaustive list of programs, but rather highlights those that have either developed or expanded in response to specific policy initiatives or opportunities, or that have developed organically at the impetus of individual educators’ interests. Broadly, many of those in the former category are within institutions of higher education, while the latter are more likely to be found within secondary schools or districts.
Key Legislation

In the last several years, several large pieces of federal legislation have been passed that are designed to facilitate the United States’ transition to a clean energy economy by investing in large-scale infrastructure, manufacturing, and clean energy technology. The Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act (IIJA) invests billions of dollars into clean transportation ($78.5 billion to expand rail, build out EV charging, and clean school buses); develop clean energy transmission ($65 billion); invest in climate resilience ($50 billion); and provide clean drinking water and clean up pollution ($76 billion). Several provisions in the bill also allow funds to be used to support workforce development tied to projects that upgrade multiple transportation systems that are key for reducing emissions. For example, funds for clean municipal bus systems can be combined with funds to train workers to maintain those buses. Likewise, funds to build a national network of electric vehicle (EV) chargers along the nation’s highway system are also available. Although not required to receive federal funds, the bill also allows states to develop plans that combine transportation and infrastructure improvements with workforce development efforts. Finally, in spring 2023, almost 18 months after the bill was passed, the administration announced that, as part of that legislation, $72 million will also be spent to expand pathways to clean energy jobs through a combination of investments at existing Industrial Assessment Centers (IACs) and Building Training and Assessment Centers (BTACs), which are housed at universities and colleges across multiple states, including Oklahoma, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Texas, and California.

$72 million

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The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provides almost $400 billion in funding just for clean energy and sustainability by increasing demand for low- and no-emissions products. For example, the bill provides tax credits to consumers and businesses for purchasing or investing in solar and wind technology, energy efficiency and weatherization, EVs, and heat pumps. It also provides incentives to increase the development and manufacturing of clean technologies in the United States. Funds are provided to help improve energy efficiency in industrial sites and for restoration projects in forests and coastal lands. As consumers take advantage of those credits, more industries will bring clean energy manufacturing to the United States, federal restoration projects will increase, and skilled workers will be needed to carry out jobs across the country in myriad industries and work sites. These investments are set to scale up the implementation and deployment of clean technologies that already exist.

The CHIPS and Science Act that was signed into law in the spring of 2022 authorizes almost $70 billion for the development of zero-carbon industries and climate research. The investments from this bill are set to speed up the time between development and scaling, which means these new industries may emerge on a faster than average timeline. This bill is also designed to help keep the bulk of jobs associated with scaling of new technologies in the United States.
In addition to those three pieces of federal legislation, individual states have also passed legislation designed to grow the green workforce. Between 2019 and 2022, Illinois, New Mexico, Washington State, Maine, Virginia, and Maryland all passed laws focused specifically on different aspects of climate workforce development, including direct investments to develop climate jobs, grow apprenticeship programs, retrain fossil fuel workers, and expand conservation efforts through youth employment. Additionally, California and New York have passed multiple bills in an effort to grow their green labor markets over the last several years. For example, California passed the Golden State Pathways Program law which provides $500 million for the development of educational pathways in four key areas, including STEM-based climate resilience. In New York, $120 million was allocated for workforce development for green industries, and in 2022, three additional laws designed to support the implementation of the original legislation were also passed at the state level. These are combined with the local New York City Climate Mobilization Act, which is designed to create jobs in green construction and building retrofitting in the city.

While the federal legislation is expected to create climate jobs in communities across the country, it is likely that even more jobs will be created in states and localities where investment efforts are made from multiple policy and funding streams, such as in New York where federal, state, and local policies are all aligned toward the creation of a green economy. With so many new, emerging, and shifting economic sectors and demand for skills needed at all levels, there is opportunity for the education and training sectors to meet the moment by both developing and scaling training and pathway models for students at all levels.

**Education-Focused Initiatives**

In the last several years, an initiative of the Aspen Institute called Planet Ed has been working to create sets of recommendations for how different educational sectors can address the climate crisis. While its postsecondary
education initiative is still under development, in 2021 Planet Ed released its recommendations for K–12-based climate solutions. These included developing and implementing CTE pathways focused on clean energy and sustainability. Despite that recommendation, the U.S. Department of Education has been slow to respond to the call to support schools to develop these kinds of programs. For example, the department’s Green Ribbon Schools initiative, its most visible effort toward creating sustainable education, is an awards program for schools that provides recognition for schools that are already engaged in sustainability efforts such as reducing a school’s environmental impact, improving health and wellness, and providing sustainability education. However, the federal Carl D. Perkins legislation, which provides funding to states for CTE education, may prove to provide another substantive avenue to supporting the development of CTE for green careers, because it requires states to create CTE programs that are aligned with local and regional labor market demand. As green jobs become more prevalent, states will be able to align CTE pathways with those jobs and labor markets that are growing. Additionally, Advance CTE, which is an organization comprised of state CTE directors, developed and now manages the Career Clusters Framework, which is a framework of 16 career clusters that many states use to establish the CTE offerings that are available within their states. The framework is currently undergoing a revision process, and the new framework may include more updated career pathway and curricular recommendations that specifically encompass career clusters and pathways for jobs in the green economy. If this happens, it would provide states with a framework for determining the kinds of pathways they may want to adopt that are related to green careers, and that could be eligible for federal CTE funds.

Postsecondary Education

While much of federal and state legislation is geared toward growing jobs through the clean energy transition, initiatives and funding for developing education and training programs to help people learn skills to be able to fill those jobs have been slower to emerge. At the same time, many of the earliest jobs to arise out of the shift to a more sustainable economy are middle skill jobs, which are defined as those that provide good wages but require less than a four-year college degree. For this reason, community colleges and secondary CTE programs, particularly those that provide support for transitions to community college, are poised to be at the center of education and training for skills in the green economy. Even so, only a small number of the nation’s 4,000 colleges and universities have created voluntary climate commitments.

Prior to the most recent suite of federal legislation and state laws, several community college systems did invest in developing programming for jobs in the green economy around the same time that the federal American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) was passed in 2009, which was partially designed to modernize the energy infrastructure. For example, the Illinois Green Economy Network was formed in 2008 as a collaboration between the consortium of 39 community colleges in the state, the state department of commerce, and the governor’s office. The network works with community colleges to support the development of curriculum and pathways for students in the fields of building sciences, energy, food, manufacturing, natural resources, transportation, waste, and water. Similarly, in 2010 the community college system of North Carolina engaged in a system-wide initiative called Code Green, designed to redesign the curricula across 82 different degree programs in the fields of energy efficiency and sustainability, building, transportation, engineering technology, and environment and energy. This effort included bringing in content experts to advise on curricula and training staff on new content. Additionally, over time, some campuses have incorporated green building designs into some of their buildings to showcase building operations that could be used as teaching tools for students. Many of these changes have been sustained across the campuses and continue to be used to train students for jobs in these growing industries. While the ARRA
provided some support for the development of the green economy under the Obama administration, it’s shortcomings in promoting a full-scale energy transition at the time were able to provide lessons for the more recent federal legislation in creating policy that will more likely lead to lasting economic changes toward a clean energy transition. Likewise, the educational programs that grew from those investments may be able to provide examples for how other state community college systems might also engage in expanding and transforming curricula and programs.3

More recently, other initiatives at the postsecondary level have begun to materialize. For example, the New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities initiative provides funding to the state’s 18 community colleges to develop four workforce collaboratives between educational institutions and employer partners, including one collaborative focused on energy and infrastructure. Likewise, Colorado is providing scholarships at five community colleges for students pursuing training in clean energy as part of the larger goal of transitioning the state to 100 percent renewable energy by 2040. In California, the Chancellor of Community Colleges has been advocating for community college leadership in the growth of green jobs training across the state. To that end, the state established the California Center for Climate Change Action at West Los Angeles College in 2022. Since then, the college has begun organizing other community colleges to address issues of climate change and workforce development.

While many of these programs focus on training students for the immediate jobs in infrastructure, building and architecture, electricity, and clean energy that are emerging now, both Ohio and New York are developing programs designed to take advantage of the kinds of industry investments that are being spurred by the CHiPs and Science Act in particular. Specifically, in 2022, Ohio announced a collaboration between Intel and all 23 community colleges in the state to work together to develop two-year programs that lead to jobs in the semiconductor industry. Likewise, the State University of New York leads a collective of other colleges and nonprofit and industry
partners through the New Energy New York initiative to both develop new energy batteries for charging and storage of clean energy and support the development of the manufacturing base to support that industry. Additionally, New York State is also home to the Northeast Regional Defense Technology Hub, which is a consortium of universities, community colleges, and industry partners that is working to help develop new careers in the semiconductor industry. Jobs in this industry are important for the continuing fight to slow climate change because it enables new generations of technology, some yet to be invented, that will help in the efforts to reduce energy usage and bring down emissions.4

Also in New York, at the regional level, The City University of New York (CUNY) is using funds from the city to develop green jobs programs at six of its campuses. Several of these will focus on programs in off-shore wind, an industry that the city is spending $191 million to develop. Other programs will focus on hybrid and EV repair, the built environment (the built structures in which people live and work), opportunities such as paid summer research jobs in clean energy, and a Climate Scholars mentoring and research program.

Other higher education institutions and systems inclusive of both two- and four-year colleges that are benefiting from federal funds to develop programming in green jobs training and development received funds through the federal Good Jobs Challenge. This program is a grant program funded by the 2021 American Rescue Plan in which local workforce systems applied for funding from the U.S. Department of Commerce for investments to spur growth in priority industries. Thirty-two winning localities were announced in fall 2022. Of these, several included postsecondary partners and focused on jobs related to climate resilience and the clean energy transition. For example, the Foundation for California Community Colleges won $21 million to scale a program in forest health and fire safety in direct response to the growing wildfire crisis in the state. Likewise, the University of Hawaii won $16 million for programs that focus on five different industries, including energy and resilience. The North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, which is an HBCU (historically Black college or university), also received $23 million from the program to develop training programs in clean energy and climate resilience across 16 underserved communities across the state.

Secondary Education

While many of the federal and state dollars designed to invest in the development of the green workforce have begun to make their way to community colleges and other institutions spurring the beginning of more widespread investment and curricular reforms at that level, changes in CTE at the high school level have been less widespread and often occur at the level of a single school, rather than through state- or district-wide efforts. The Golden State Pathways Program in California may be an exception. This legislation established a competitive grant program in 2022, which is designed to provide resources to local education agencies to support the development of pathways for students in four high priority fields, including climate-related fields. Typically, high school CTE pathways include some combination of career education through course work, dual enrollment opportunities (when high school students earn college credits), work-based learning experiences, and the earning of career-related credentials.5 These pathways in California are supposed to allow students to transition easily from high school to postsecondary education, as well as to work with industry employers and other partners to develop opportunities for students that are aligned with local labor markets. Specifically, they are intended to promote pathways that lead to high-wage jobs in high-growth fields, encourage collaboration between schools districts and local employers, enable more students to access postsecondary education and workforce development, and to prepare workers for fields experiencing high levels of labor demand.
These pathways will also build on other statewide CTE programs, such as the California Partnership Academies, which are career academies that are partially funded by the state. Career academies are programs embedded within high schools that offer cohorts of students a combination of rigorous academic and career-themed course work combined with work-based learning opportunities. The state provides funding for over 400 academies, some of which have a focus on climate-related careers. An example of one of these is the green energy pathway at Skyline High School in Oakland, where students take classes with green energy themes, visit local clean energy companies, have internships, create a “Classroom of the Future” project, and produce a capstone project about renewable energy solutions for their community during the 12th grade year.

Other state-wide programs that have provided some funding for green jobs-focused CTE programs at some schools include New York State’s funding for Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECH). These schools provide students with an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and an applied associate’s degree simultaneously from a partner community college, and each school also has one or more industry sponsors who provide work-based learning experiences, such as internships, mentoring, and job shadowing for students. New York State has invested funding to open more than 50 of these school across the state. Among the P-TECH schools that have received funding thus far, several have a focus on green jobs, including the Clean Technologies Early College High School, which is partnered with Hudson Valley Community College, and which focuses on pathways in fields such as clean energy, engineering, and public and community health, among others. An author site visit to this school found students who had engaged in activities such as conducting energy audits of their homes, learning about solar from the school’s solar installation, and taking courses on topics such as the Millenium Development Goals. Energy Tech High School in NYC, which is another P-TECH model school, focuses on training in energy engineering and provides some learning experiences for students in clean energy. These include participating in summer internships with the New York Power Authority, an electric power utility that produces hydroelectric...
power. Additionally, two schools that won additional state funding to become new P-TECH schools in 2023 will also focus on climate-related career themes. The Harbor School in New York City is already a CTE high school focused on pathways in seven marine-focused career areas and works closely with Billion Oyster Project to help restore oyster reefs in New York Harbor. The school will now partner with SUNY Maritime to develop into a P-TECH school. Another partnership between Westchester Community College and Yonkers Public Schools also includes Groundwork Hudson Valley, a nonprofit that focuses on environmental sustainability in urban areas and works with young people on climate resiliency and education. The career pathways that will be supported are in climate resilience and urban forestry.

In other areas of the country, even in the absence of strong policy support, some individual schools and programs are nonetheless focused on supporting students to prepare for green jobs. For example, the Green Tech Academy is a green jobs-focused career academy at Olathe West High School in Olathe, Kansas. The program includes two CTE pathways focused on clean energy and sustainable agriculture. Students in the sustainable agriculture program take courses in sustainable resource management and plant and animal science. Students in the clean energy pathway take courses in computer-aided design and the fundamentals of the energy industry. Students in both pathways take AP Environmental Science and complete a senior year capstone project. The academy engages students in project-based learning, internships with related employers, and community service projects related to the two pathways, and many of its graduates plan to continue careers in green fields. Another model is the LA Regional Cleantech Academy in Los Angeles, which works with young people, ages 16–24, most of whom are students of color in households with low incomes. This program provides an intensive paid internship program that combines jobs readiness skills training in areas such as communication and teamwork with placements at local clean energy companies that work in hydrogen, solar, and water, providing entrée into areas that are growing quickly in the Los Angeles region. Some schools have also addressed climate change from both an infrastructure and workforce development angle. For example, East Providence High School in Rhode Island was renovated to incorporate green building features such as impervious surfaces for better storm water drainage, efficient HVAC systems, EV charging stations, and visible meters for staff and students to monitor energy and water consumption. The school also includes three greenhouses, which are used by the school's culinary CTE programs to grow produce. Other CTE programs in the school also use the school's infrastructure to inform CTE pathways. Other similar programs at individual high schools exist across the country, and some regions are also making wider investments in expanding these kinds of programs.
For example, the Climatarium program in Colorado works with rural school districts across the southern part of the state to build CTE pathways in sustainable agriculture and other environmental pathways. Additionally, the state of Delaware, which is home to a comprehensive statewide CTE pathway program, a statewide effort to increase career education and the earning of college degrees or employment certificates across the population has been piloting an environmental literacy program that explores the intersection of climate issues and workforce within CTE pathways across the state, and it is tied to the educational goals of the state's climate action plan.\textsuperscript{10}

**Barriers to Development**

While many of the programs outlined here have just begun to emerge, a forthcoming case study by MDRC found barriers that can hinder the development of CTE programs that focus on new or emerging areas of work.\textsuperscript{11} As described above, green jobs and skills encompass a wide range of industries, skills, and levels, the scope of which can make it difficult to define. For this reason, one of the barriers to development of education and training programs designed to promote their growth is a lack of agreement across sectors about what green skills are and what areas of the labor market will grow fastest. One of the barriers that emerged was a lack of clarity and agreement about the skills that workers need. For example, understanding whether a given set of construction and building skills provide adequate knowledge and experience for a worker to build and install materials that are specific to more energy efficient construction, such as triple pane windows and automatic light controls, may not be easily determined from existing certifications or training modalities (e.g., apprenticeship, community college program). Some of the barriers discussed include lengthy timelines, sometimes stretching for multiple years, for program development and approvals at state levels or within college systems. These may be related to a variety of factors, such as the need to develop knowledge for new curriculum and content among staff as well as slow bureaucratic processes for approval. For example, one community college that is preparing to start an offshore wind training program has been working on its development for four years and began by sending staff to Europe, where the industry is much more developed, for training. Likewise, a lack of cross-state agreement about skills and
certifications creates inefficiency because each state develops its own programs and requirements, which can hinder coordination among states for developing regional education and training strategies.

“One of the barriers that emerged was a lack of clarity and agreement about the skills that workers need.”

Some of the barriers are particular to the expansion of the green labor market, because emerging fields may require new certifications that teachers can earn to be able to teach specific content, as well as certifications for students to earn. The development and training of teaching staff is further complicated by already existing teacher shortages in CTE, which is one of the fields that is frequently identified as hard to staff. Lack of existing certifications for students to earn that demonstrate competencies in new areas and technologies also create challenges. For example, many automotive certificates do not include training in EVs. There are also barriers to collaboration between employers and educational institutions. Some of these include challenges in understanding how each sector works and the different norms around timelines and expectations for action and decision-making. Industry often works on timelines of weeks for making decisions, where educational institutions often work on timelines of months or years to create approvals and make decisions. For example, it has historically been challenging for employers and community colleges to collaborate due to lack of effective cross-sector communication and agreement on roles in the development of the future talent pipeline, and these challenges are no different in the development of pathways and content for green jobs training.

Evidence-Based Programs

Since many of these programs have just begun in the last few years, there is little to no research evidence yet about their effectiveness for supporting students to obtain good jobs in the green and blue economy. However, there is a body of existing evidence that already supports the development of successful community college and secondary CTE programs. For example, high-quality CTE programs have been shown to boost high school graduation, college enrollment, and earnings. With curricula organized around specific career themes, they offer internships and other work-based learning experiences and provide opportunities to earn industry-recognized credentials and college credits while still in high school. For example, a rigorous evaluation of the Career Academies model found that students who had been randomly admitted to academies had much higher earnings than students who were not randomly admitted to the academies up to eight years after high school graduation. Another rigorous study of P-TECH model schools in New York City found that students who had randomly won seats in one of the schools were more likely to have earned a college degree by three years after high school graduation, and the effect was primarily driven by young men. Overall, the evidence indicates that high school CTE programs appear to work particularly well for students who have lagged in educational attainment. Secondary CTE programs have been successful for students across many fields of study, and particularly so for some fields related to green jobs, such as construction, suggesting that similar models focused on green jobs and careers may have similar effects.

There is also evidence to suggest that career-focused programs at community colleges can also help boost student earnings. Several studies have found that students who engaged in career training certificate programs in community college experienced increased earnings, while other programs that provided a variety of supports to students in community colleges have been found to increase degree completion at these institutions. Given the evidence base about the kinds of programs that support positive student outcomes, adapting these kinds of programs to focus on training students for jobs in the green economy may be an efficient way to replicate success by developing evidence-based programs in new fields relevant for these growing areas of the economy.

Conclusion

The United States is at the beginning of the transition to a cleaner energy future, driven by federal and state legislation and investments in the technology and infrastructure that will make that transition possible. However, the underlying goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions on strict timelines may be hampered by a lack of workers...
with the skills necessary to carry out the work of that transition. Many programs that focus on preparing students for careers through education and training at both community colleges and secondary schools are beginning to respond to the need to support the development of talent to carry out these jobs. Community colleges and systems in particular have been able to capitalize on federal investments to develop programs for training students for the jobs in the green economy. Secondary school CTE programs have also begun to develop CTE programs and pathways in these fields, but with less direct access to funding and lacking a coordinated strategy for change, these efforts are often isolated to single schools or programs. In order to meet the level of demand for jobs on the timeline that is required for emissions reductions, a more coordinated systemic approach may be warranted. Relying on evidence-based programs to be able to develop and build programming that is likely to be successful for students provides a possible road map for moving forward with rapid scaling and expansion of high-quality programs that will both support student success and help the country meet its climate goals.
References


8. Author, field notes.


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