



*Providing Meaningful
Work for All Americans:
An Agenda for 2021*

Academy Election 2020 Project
Working Group:
Connect Individuals to Meaningful Work





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ABOUT THE ELECTION 2020 PROJECT

The Academy formed a series of Working Groups of its Fellows to address [Grand Challenges in Public Administration](#). These Groups were charged with producing one or more papers to advise the Administration in 2021 (whether reelected or newly elected) on the key near-time actions that should be taken to begin addressing Grand Challenges. This is a paper of the Working Group for [Connect Individuals to Meaningful Work](#). It includes these Fellows' recommendations for the American government to build ongoing capability and capacity in the public workforce to secure and advance agencies' missions.

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***PROVIDING MEANINGFUL
WORK FOR ALL AMERICANS:
AN AGENDA FOR 2021***

A REPORT OF AN ACADEMY WORKING GROUP

**NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
ELECTION 2020 WORKING GROUP:
MODERNIZE AND REINVIGORATE THE PUBLIC WORKFORCE**

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THE CHALLENGE

Today, connecting individuals to meaning work has societal urgency; it is the means by which we can address growing unemployment, disconnection from the current and future economy, and growing income disparities. Not since the Great Depression has the need to facilitate connecting individuals to meaningful work been central to the work of public administration. This working paper offers actionable recommendations to leverage existing programs as well as to develop new initiatives to connect individuals to meaning work and economic opportunities.

Humans have an innate quest for meaning. Our jobs and our work are a principal means for fulfilling that need—they have both instrumental and intrinsic value. Instrumentally, work provides the means by which we make a living and support our families. Work also has important implications for one’s personal identity, with much of our self-esteem deriving from it. When work is perceived as meaningful, people have a sense of fulfillment and purpose that not only strengthens their psychological welfare, but also contributes to other aspects of life and to an individual’s overall life purpose.

Work is not just important for individuals and families—it is also a critical foundation for the nation’s economy, tax revenues, healthcare, and communities. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid changes to the world of work had caused many individuals and communities to experience a great sense of dislocation, income inequity and loss, even as the income and wealth of others grew substantially:

- Artificial Intelligence and globalization meant that manufacturing and production jobs were no longer pathways to economic security and a stable life.
- Individuals were facing the need to reskill and upskill in order to avoid being left behind.
- Labor force participation in our country had already fallen from nearly 70 percent before the Great Recession to approximately 63 percent.

- Millions of working-age Americans (in particular males 25-54) were neither working nor seeking work.

Now, in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, things have gotten much worse. At some points during the summer of 2020, about 1 in 5 workers were collecting unemployment benefits. Although the unemployment rate declined in August 2020, it remained over 8 percent. Many large retail chains and tens of thousands of small businesses have closed permanently. States and localities have been laying off workers and imposing hiring freezes. Without a quick rebound, many Americans' knowledge, skills, and abilities may atrophy—putting them at-risk for long-term joblessness and economic pain.

Although there is no easy fix for these challenges, the Administration in 2021 (whether reelected or newly elected) can take steps to stabilize and improve the situation in the near-term while taking a series of policy and administrative actions that set the nation on a path toward broad-based meaningful work and prosperity for all Americans.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW

The global coronavirus pandemic has upended our economy and our traditional modes and models of work. While many in our country have retained work that provides sufficient income, dignity and enjoyment, millions of others have not. Our immediate and urgent challenge is to create meaningful work for all Americans. What individuals do--their labor, earnings, purchases, and the taxes they pay--is a primary determinant of economic performance and political stability. If we hope to develop a stronger economy as we recover from the global impacts of the pandemic, we must understand what is happening to work and intentionally strive to connect individuals to meaningful, reliable, productive work.

Governments at all levels—federal, state, and local—offer workforce development programs. For example, the [apprenticeship program](#) managed by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) provides information about apprenticeships in multiple industries, explains how to establish a program, and provides access to apprenticeship openings. The program serves as a one-stop source connecting career seekers, employers, and education partners to apprenticeship resources. As noted on the DOL

website, “Apprenticeship is an industry-driven, high-quality career pathway where employers can develop and prepare their future workforce, and individuals can obtain paid work experience, classroom instruction, and a portable, nationally-recognized credential.”

Apprenticeships support entry level positions across a wide variety of career fields, from the traditional blue-collar trades through technical and even management tracks. These programs are driven by industry, certified by the federal government, and searchable online. They offer paths to new careers for job-changers and initial entry for new workers. They are a model program, having placed almost 700,00 new apprentices since January 1, 2017, who can expect to earn an average starting salary of \$70,000.

The Department of Labor has other important workforce development programs, including some that focus on youth:

- [High Growth Youth Offender Initiative](#) provides occupational training, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, internships, and other work-based learning to help former offenders gain the skills necessary to enter high-growth, high-demand industries. Projects focus on addressing the workforce needs of growing industries that provide employment opportunities and potential for advancement.
- [Job Corps](#) is a free education and training program that helps young people 16 and older learn about a career, earn a high school diploma or GED, and find and keep a good job.
- [School District Youth Offender Initiative](#) supports the development of strategies for reducing youth involvement in gangs using a workforce development approach.
- [Youth Build](#) provides job training and educational opportunities for at-risk youth, ages 16-24, while constructing or rehabilitating affordable housing for low-income or homeless families in their neighborhoods. Youth split their time between the construction site and the classroom, where they earn their GED or high school diploma, learn to be community leaders, and prepare for college and other postsecondary training opportunities.

Every state has a state workforce agency, and DOL provides information about them on its [website](#). These agencies comprise the main US DOL partners who get federal grants, and combine them with state funds to address specific employment needs in their states. These state workforce agencies deliver training, employment, and career and business services. They also administer the unemployment insurance, veteran reemployment, and labor market information programs. In general, the existing system allows individual communities to tailor their workforce assistance programs to local employers and employment opportunities.

Concerns remain among DOL recipients that these programs are tedious to manage, place unnecessary limitations on their targeted audience, and use metrics that often weed out people who most need the assistance. Accordingly, opportunities exist to enhance these programs by, for example, giving greater flexibility to design and customize training to meet more regional business skill requirements or emerging industries. In addition, there are opportunities to build upon some innovative programs and models for COVID-related job displacements.

Nongovernmental organizations have been adopting new strategies to ensure that America has the workforce it needs. For example, Markle's Rework America initiative seeks to ensure that all Americans, especially those without a bachelor's degree, can be successful in the digital economy:

- The Rework America Business Network has established a network that shares and promotes effective workplace practices while advocating for a skills-based approach.
- The Rework America Alliance works to ensure that worker training is tailored to the jobs that employers will need to fill.
- The Rework America Learning Network leverages a collaboration among innovative training providers, practitioners, organizations, and leaders working to build the skills of adults without a bachelor's degree.
- The Skillful State Network collaborates with governors from over 25 states to provide a forum for state leaders to share and accelerate workforce development.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) is another nongovernmental organization operating in this space. It seeks to ensure economic advancement for all by transforming the American workforce and education systems. It works with national leaders across a wide range of areas (including education, workforce development, business, and government) to develop powerful partnerships and networks to scale impact nationwide. Among other things, it is working to expand apprenticeship and work-based learning to new industries and professions, develop strategies to match the supply of skilled workers with job market demands, run a Student Success Center network to spread evidence-based practices that lead to good jobs for students, and foster innovative education and workforce systems solutions through JFF labs.

Other examples of innovation in nongovernmental organizations abound.

RELATIONSHIP OF WORKFORCE ISSUES TO OTHER NATIONAL NEEDS

There appears to be widespread agreement in the United States that the nation has a significant need for additional investments in the areas of research, manufacturing, and infrastructure. This consensus has driven a focus to strengthen Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) curricula at every level of education. This shift has been made more urgent by the most recent [Infrastructure Report Card](#) from the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), which gives the nation’s infrastructure overall a grade of D+. In their scoring, a D is considered poor; a C, mediocre; a B, Good; and an A, Exceptional. Table 1 shows the grade for 16 different categories of infrastructure. Rail scores the highest, with a B. No other category scores higher than a C+.

Infrastructure Category and Grade	
Aviation: D	Parks and Recreation: D+
Bridges: C+	Ports: C+
Dams: D	Rail: B
Drinking Water: D	Roads: D
Energy: D+	Schools: D+
Hazardous Waste: D+	Solid Waste: C+
Inland Waterways: D	Transit: D-
Levees: D	Wastewater: D+

Table 1. Infrastructure Report Card

Investments in these areas can deliver significant economic and social benefits. Businesses and individuals lose “time, productivity, and opportunities due to excessive traffic, delayed shipments, disruptions in energy supplies, and connectivity issues,” the [House Budget Committee](#) notes. This Committee’s September 2019 hearing with experts found bipartisan agreement regarding the economic importance of infrastructure and ways that individuals and businesses are ill-served by the nation’s current transportation, water, energy, broadband, and other infrastructure systems. ASCE estimates that the nation needs to invest an additional [\\$2 trillion in infrastructure](#) over a ten-year period.

Although infrastructure investments are a generally acknowledged need, there are disagreements about exactly how much is needed, how it should be funded, and what its focus should be. This Working Group was not charged with evaluating national infrastructure needs or recommending a new national infrastructure program or a specific investment level. However, if the Administration and Congress in 2021 choose to undertake major investments in American technology, research and development, manufacturing, and infrastructure, they should link that investment strategy to a workforce strategy that makes providing meaningful work to Americans a central component of this larger program. Policymakers and administrators must recognize that infrastructure investment and workforce development go hand-in-hand.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONNECTING INDIVIDUALS TO MEANINGFUL WORK

The Administration in 2021 will have a significant opportunity to advance strategies, programs, and initiatives to provide meaningful work for all Americans in response to the economic devastation resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. Our current approach to managing the labor market has used the model of the industrial revolution; we break the problem into parts and develop a solution to each part. At the federal and state levels, our legislative policymaking has established individual programs and funding streams that are supported by interest groups and constituencies. Our legislative and executive organizations at both levels of government are organized to support this behavior. This has led to workforce development and investment approaches at the local level that are program-, project- and grant-driven in separate departments. The

complex labor challenges of today require integrated approaches involving multiple agencies and departments, made possible by shared data and information systems and platforms.

The Administration’s meaningful work agenda should rest on the pillars of creating demand for employment through any new investments in infrastructure, research, development, and manufacturing; satisfying that demand through focused workforce development; streamlining the employment pipeline and making it easier to connect job seekers with employment; expanding opportunities for national and community service; and developing a longer-term social equity agenda for the workforce.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Make Workforce Development and Opportunity a Key Part of Any Infrastructure Plans and Strategies.

The Administration in 2021 should leverage infrastructure strategies, plans, and funds to create demand and to focus on future needs and sustainability. Those who work front-line jobs in the infrastructure field are getting older, with approximately three million expected to retire within the next ten years. As Joseph Kane of the Brookings Institution notes, “[h]iring, training, and retaining a new generation of infrastructure workers will help drive our recovery and create a stronger, more resilient infrastructure system for the future.”¹ Infrastructure jobs do not require a college education, pay higher wages, and cannot be outsourced to other countries. Investments in this area can be used to create economic mobility for individuals of all ages without a four-year college degree.

The Administration and Congress in 2021 should take the following steps to make workforce development and job creation a central part of any new infrastructure investments:

- Make a long-term commitment to any major new investments through a multi-year authorization;

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/04/07/covid-19-is-a-chance-to-invest-in-our-essential-infrastructure-workforce/>

- Ensure funds are directed toward workforce education and training services, including those designed to reskill and upskill workers for the needed jobs of tomorrow;
- Task states and localities with identifying “shovel-ready” projects and their employment impacts;
- Allocate resources to communities where investments will have the most significant infrastructure, sustainability, and employment impacts;
- Connect workforce development to investment in public health capabilities for addressing the current pandemic and developing capacity for addressing on-going and future prevention efforts;
- Develop new intergovernmental and cross-sectoral arrangements that will bring financial resources to the economic development and infrastructure work of local governments; and
- Broaden investment in broadband connectivity to all areas of the country, as part of the national infrastructure investment strategy, to ensure that all Americans can take advantage of remote work, training, and education.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Use Collaborative Governance Models to Ensure that Workforce Development Programs Can Satisfy Demand.

If the Administration and Congress in 2021 choose to embark on a major infrastructure program, the demand for workers will increase significantly. To meet this demand, federal workforce programs will need to use a more collaborative governance and management model. Intentionally focused workforce development programs will be critical given that manufacturing jobs now not only require technical knowledge but also use a range of other competencies; newer assembly lines are based on systems of flow that require line members to function and be accountable as a team and require workers to be interchangeable across positions and roles. Both technical and team skill development can certainly be built into formal education curricula.

The Working Group believes that it is necessary to establish a more collaborative governance approach to the delivery of workforce

programs centered on individuals and families rather than the agencies or levels of government that provide the services by:

- Expanding partnerships between community colleges and vocational/technical schools and industry;
- Continuing to support reemployment services and apprenticeships;
- Increasing opportunities for distance learning;
- Facilitating integrated service delivery through enhanced grant flexibility by proactively using existing program waivers to allow state and local governments to braid and blend funds to create person-centered service delivery models;
- Providing flexibility to states to test a range of reemployment solutions and target populations to build a stronger evidence base on what works under different conditions.
- Designing and piloting community care coordination delivery models to support flexible and agile service delivery under varied local conditions;
- Enabling state and local government and other community experts to participate in designing and planning collaborative approaches;
- Ensuring that the voice of the worker is heard by encouraging state and local workforce development organizations to form inclusive working groups;
- Establishing shared knowledge platforms and clearinghouses;²
- Developing intergovernmental partnerships across federal, state and local agencies specifically focused on connecting individuals to meaningful work;
- Collecting effective practices and successful models of workforce development, disseminating across states and localities; and

² For additional information about collaborative governance approaches and a broader set of recommendations to this end, see the Academy Working Group's Election 2020 paper on Public Governance:

https://www.napawash.org/uploads/Election_2020_Public_Governance.pdf.

- Expanding federal funding for the bipartisan Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.³

Development of an effective national workforce strategy must recognize that, while there is certainly a global labor market and that access to that market is getting progressively simpler for many sectors, many employment decisions are made locally. Ensuring meaningful work for Americans is fundamentally an intergovernmental challenge that requires leveraging regional and industry partnerships for learning, reskilling, upskilling, and professional development. In fostering development of such partnerships across levels of government and sectors, the Administration should ensure that federal workforce programs work in partnership with states, localities, and nonprofit organizations consistent with the Guiding Principles identified in Appendix A

RECOMMENDATION 3: Improve Connections Between Job Seekers and Employers By Streamlining the Employment Pipeline.

It will be necessary to coordinate the many existing educational programs to create a continuous ladder of worker development from high school to graduate school, or from high school through increasingly demanding technical credentials. Workers in these skill areas have the potential to earn at middle to higher income levels. The Smidt Family Foundation enlisted the University of Chicago (NORC) Center to undertake an attitude survey of parents, students, and educators on this approach to education, developing skills for excellence in technical education. Their findings provide overwhelming support for this approach.⁴

The Working Group recommends that the Administration in 2021 work with Congress to:

- Invest in Reemployment Services that accelerate return to work for individuals receiving unemployment compensation;

³ This Act promotes program alignment at the federal, state, local, and regional level and builds upon proven practices such as career pathways, regional economic approaches, and work-based training.

⁴ “*Skilled trades in high schools: what voters, parents and students want from policymaker and educators*, University of Chicago NORC Center, supported by the Smidt Foundation, (June, 2020).

- Expand and scale-up apprenticeship programs and other earn-and-learn strategies that upskill employees of all ages in a wide range of high-demand industries;
- Establish new industry-recognized programs;
- Develop new analytical capacity and new data sets that help identify new solutions for implementation; and
- Expand remote training and work opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Expand National Service Programs.

The federal government has a number of agencies—including the Peace Corps and the Corporation for National and Community Service—that offer more than 300,000 national service positions annually. As documented by the National Commission on Military, National, and Community Service, these programs benefit individuals and communities by enhancing education; providing economic opportunity; meeting healthcare and other long-term needs; advancing environmental conservation; and providing support for disaster preparedness and recovery. Individuals benefit in numerous ways. Not only are they connected to something larger than themselves, but they also develop practical new skills that enhance their future prospects for higher-paying jobs. Communities are able to use these programs to meet unmet needs and ultimately to improve their civic life.⁵

The Working Group finds great value in the National Commission’s report, *Inspired to Serve*, and recommends that the Administration in 2021 work with Congress to expand opportunities for national and community service by:

- Significantly increasing the number of available service positions;
- Enhancing the compensation and benefits associated with these programs to ensure that individuals of all economic circumstances have a meaningful opportunity to participate;
- Using national service to reintegrate ex-offenders into the social and economic life of the nation and improve the

⁵ <https://inspire2serve.gov/sites/default/files/final-report/Final%20Report.pdf>

workforce re-reentry prospects for those who left the workforce involuntarily due to disability or job loss;

- Launching new pilot programs at the Corporation for National and Community Service;
- Establishing new public-private partnerships to leverage private investments in service, including by considering the establishment of new tax credits to incentivize private investment;
- Strengthening interagency and intergovernmental collaboration and coordination; and
- Convening the various program staff to share best practices and program outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Develop a Longer-Term Strategy to Enhance Social Equity and Meaningful Work.

Over the longer-term, the United States needs a national strategy that coordinates our social safety net programs with the implementation of these longer-term workforce development actions. Individuals and families should have access to meaningful work and a secure personal livelihood. However, those who are willing and able to go to work but whose work does not provide a living wage should not be disadvantaged by their employment status from supportive programs. Work offers dignity and should not disqualify people from needed assistance.

To this end, the Working Group recommends that the Administration in 2021 undertake a review that designs strategies to address critical social equity issues as they pertain to the world of work. This review should:

- Examine the tax system and minimum wage structures to determine how to provide additional support for the lowest-income workers, including support for transportation and child care;

- Evaluate the impact of non-compete clauses in contracts with the working poor and identify policies to address this issue;⁶
- Determine how the banking system can more effectively provide the working poor access to savings accounts, checking accounts, and loans to prevent them from using alternative sources that take advantage of their shortage of resources;⁷ and
- Encourage career leadership at DOL to take a more proactive national coordination role in working with other relevant federal agencies and the National Association of State Workforce Agencies.

CONCLUSION

The nation has a long-term need to rebuild its economy to provide meaningful work to all Americans. A strong, highly trained and motivated workforce undergirds so many national priorities and is fundamental to both national pride and productivity. There is no easy fix for these challenges. Still, the Administration in 2021 (whether reelected or newly elected) can take the policy and administrative actions identified above to not only stabilize and improve the situation in the near-term, but also set the nation on a path toward broad-based meaningful work and prosperity for all Americans. The Working Group's five recommendations above seek to operationalize a national commitment to connecting individuals to meaningful work. At the core of these recommendations is a recognition of

⁶ For example, Princeton economists have estimated that "no-poach agreements", which prevent moves between companies and even between franchises of the same company, affect employees of 70,000 restaurants in the U.S. Some of these restaurants have been challenged, and as of as August 2018, Applebee's, Church's Chicken, Five Guys, IHOP, Jamba Juice, Little Caesars, Panera Bread, and Sonic had all agreed to remove these non-compete clauses from their contracts.

⁷ According to a 2014 Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation report, 25 million Americans had no bank account at all. Another 68 million are inadequately served by banks. Although they may have bank accounts, they also rely on alternative financial services. It is not that people are simply unbanked, but that banks are becoming too prohibitively expensive for many people to use them. The Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis encourages policymakers and other to promote economic resiliency not only through cash payments but by helping to build families' wealth among the high-school educated, younger Black, Hispanic and white working-class Americans.

the value of partnerships across each level of government: federal, state, regional and local, as well as with the private sector and nongovernmental organizations.

APPENDIX A

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE INTERGOVERNMENTAL ACTION

In fostering development of partnerships across levels of government and sectors, the Administration should ensure that federal workforce programs work collaboratively with states, localities, and nonprofits to advance the following ten practices for effective intergovernmental action:

- **Outcomes.** Focus on improving outcomes for individuals, communities, and industries, with attention given to minimizing undesirable side effects and unintended consequences.
- **Communications.** Communication arrangements must be established to transmit and receive information in ways that help all levels of governments identify, define, and explain problems, strategies, results, and causal factors and decide next steps.
- **Prioritization.** Working within and across organizations, problems are prioritized using evidence, as is the selection of interventions to reduce problems.
- **Problem-Solving.** Problems should be solved and opportunities pursued at level closest to the problem with agility, efficiency, and respect for scale economies and geographical variance in surge demand and with accountability for sorting out who and which level of government needs to do what, when, and why and executing accordingly.
- **Work Across Silos:** Problem-solving within and across organizations taps and builds networks and trusted professional relationships and negotiates with respect for the interests, capacity, and constraints of others.
- **Shared Knowledge:** Data, analytics, and pilots inform decisions and actions within and across levels of government.
- **The Right Incentives:** Effectively and efficiently designed incentives (both financial and non-financial) encourage continual evidence-informed improvement without discouraging individuals or tempting gaming.
- **Efficiency:** Costs and resources are routinely integrated into decisions and actions for more effective, cost-effective results.
- **Equity:** Policies and actions consider impacts on all affected and seek to generate net positive impact for all without favor or bias.

- **Effective Leadership:** Leaders step up, are designated, or are agreed upon to guide their organization's development and deployment of knowledge, skills, resources, authorities, and relationships for improved outcomes while also developing, nurturing, and strengthening relationships with others to advance shared objectives.

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