

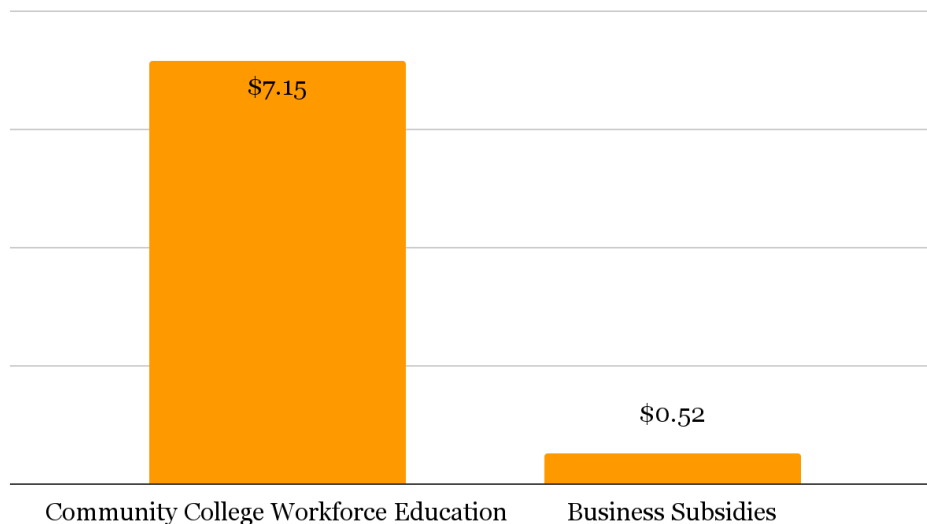


Everyone Says They Love Workforce Development, But What, Exactly, Is It?

In April, Governor Kathy Hochul [announced](#) the creation of the New York State Office of Strategic Workforce Development. The [new office](#) received \$350 million from this year's budget and is part of Empire State Development.

For many advocates, this announcement was [welcome](#). Research from experts like economist Tim Bartik has shown that [community college workforce education](#) is one of the most cost-effective ways for governments to create jobs and grow the economy, especially in comparison to giving money away to businesses via tax abatements, grants, and other forms of business subsidies.

Net Return for Every Dollar Spent



From [Bartik, 2019](#)

Unfortunately, in New York State there is little data on workforce education and workforce development. The closest thing New York has is a recent [audit of state workforce development programs](#), released by the State Comptroller in May 2022. The Comptroller's audit identified a [sprawling workforce development system](#) of more than 500 workforce development programs and services spread across 22 state agencies and

public authorities. However, the audit failed to reveal *how much is actually spent* on workforce development.

One reason no one knows how much is spent on workforce development is because there is not an exact definition for workforce development.

No Clear Definition of Workforce Development

In New York and nationally there is no clear definition of workforce development. According to the [St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank](#) (2010), “[workforce development] has come to describe a relatively wide range of activities, policies, and programs employed by geographies to create, sustain, and retain a viable workforce that can support current and future business and industry.” Beyond that, however, they note, “It is difficult to gain a consensus as to the definition of workforce development” (Ibid.)

In their comprehensive review of workforce development projects in the U.S., [Harrison and Weiss](#) (1998) examine programs that are concerned with job training, recruitment, placement, orientation, mentoring, support, and other services. They seem to think workforce development is more than employee education. Similarly, [Giloith](#) (2000) asserts that in addition to employee education, workforce development encompasses employer engagement, community connections, career advancement, welfare reform, and regional and community economic development. However, these terms are also not defined.

[Grubb](#) (1999) finds that in contrast to education alone, workforce education emphasizes “occupational preparation,” inclusive of postsecondary vocational education, adult education, short-term job training programs, and training provided by specific employers themselves. [Jacobs and Hawley](#) (2006) also find a role for the private sector in workforce development in their proposed definition: “Workforce development is the coordination of public and private sector policies and programs that provides individuals with the opportunity for a sustainable livelihood and helps organizations achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the societal context.”

In her 2020 work that provides a practical framework for training a mature workforce, [Frady](#) borrows from [Roche and Pidd](#) (2010) and defines workforce development as: “a multi-faceted approach which addresses the range of factors impacting the ability of the workforce to function with maximum effectiveness ... Workforce development should have a systems focus. Unlike traditional approaches, this is broad and comprehensive, targeting individual, organizational and structural factors, rather than just addressing education and training of individual mainstream workers.”

Texas and Florida Do Have Definitions

Notwithstanding the scholarly literature, some states have established definitions for workforce development. Texas, for example, took steps to define it with its [Workforce Investment Act](#). Title 10, Chapter 2308 of Texas law states: “workforce development” includes “workforce education and workforce training and services.” The definition goes on: “Workforce education” is defined as “articulated career-path programs and the constituent courses of those programs that lead to initial or continuing licensing or certification or associate degree-level accreditation and that are subject to: initial and ongoing state approval or regional or specialized accreditation; a formal state evaluation that provides the basis for program continuation or termination; state accountability and performance standards; and a regional or statewide documentation of the market demand for labor according to employers' needs; or are subject to approval by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board as adult vocational or continuing education courses.” Finally, “workforce training and services” are “training and services programs that are not workforce education.”

Similar to Texas, Florida’s [Reimagining Education and Career Help Act](#) establishes criteria for what constitutes a “workforce development system,” and a “workforce related program.” The latter is defined as a “program operated, delivered, or enabled, in whole or in part, by a state or local entity using federal funds or state appropriations to offer incentives, funding, support, or guidance for any of the following purposes:

1. Job training;
2. The attainment of a credential of value identified pursuant to [s. 445.004\(4\)\(h\)4.c.](#);
3. The attainment of a postsecondary degree or credential;
4. The provision of other types of employment assistance;
5. Any other program that has, at least in part, the goal of securing employment or better employment for an individual and receives federal funds or a state appropriation.”

As discussed, the New York State Comptroller's [comprehensive audit](#) of workforce development programs identified 519 programs and services offered by 22 state agencies and authorities as workforce development, yet declined to actually define what is meant by “workforce development.” The audit was scathing and revealed that state-funded workforce development programs are fragmented, duplicative, and lack unified management and coordination. One reason for the sprawling mess is that there is no clear definition of what should or should not be included under the umbrella of workforce development.

Without a definition, how can we assess how well existing programs operate? How can we scale successful programs? How can there be comprehensive oversight over workforce development programs?

Recommendations for New York

Other states have led the way when it comes to establishing a definition for workforce development, while New York State lags behind. Having a clear definition for workforce development is essential so policymakers can identify and scale programs that work, and get rid of programs that don't work. Lacking a definition also indicates that there is little oversight and accountability for existing programs. We recommend these initial steps:

1. The Governor and Legislature should establish a formal definition for workforce development.
2. The Governor and Legislature should form an expert commission to report to the public on which workforce development programs in New York State work best, and which programs and practices in other U.S. states New York should adopt. The commission should publicly report on its findings within six months and recommend how New York State should structure and fund its sprawling array of programs.
3. The Governor and Legislature should consolidate all workforce development programs under the umbrella of a single office.
4. The Department of Labor should develop universal criteria for evaluating Workforce Development programs and publish the return on investment (ROI) on all NYS-funded programs.