# Bridging the Gap:

## A Regional Landscape Survey of K–12 to Post-Secondary Pathway Readiness in the Mountainland Region

September 2026


**Gary R. Herbert Institute**

**Dori Whitehead**
Research Assistant

**Austin Bench**
Research Assistant

**Alexa Herrera**
Research Assistant

**David Connelly, PhD**
Research Director

**Workforce Alignment**

**Stefanie D. Adams, MS**
Director-Regional Pathways, Mountainland Region

**Wendy Simmerman, MEd**
Senior Director-Workforce Alignment






UVU | GARY R. HERBERT INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY | WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

## Introduction

Utah has a substantial workforce-readiness ecosystem in place. Across K–12 schools, technical colleges, universities, workforce agencies, employers, and outreach programs, the state has invested heavily in helping students move from high school into postsecondary education, training, and employment. Programs such as concurrent enrollment, Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways, technical college certificates, internships, workforce training, community education, and outreach initiatives all play a role in that effort.

To better understand how those pieces work together, we interviewed key stakeholders across Utah's Mountainland region, including leaders in K–12 education, higher education, technical education, workforce agencies, community education, outreach programs, and related support systems.[1] We asked how the current workforce-readiness landscape functions, what is working well, where students still encounter friction, and what future policy efforts should build on.

The clearest takeaway from those conversations is that the region's workforce-readiness system does not lack programs. The Mountainland region already has strong programs, partnerships, infrastructure, and local leadership. The harder challenge is helping students understand what opportunities are available, how to access them, what value they offer, and how one opportunity connects to the next. A student may have several viable options and still struggle to see a clear path through them.

This challenge is becoming more important as Utah implements HB 260 through the First Credential Master Plan. First Credential is intended to help students leave high school with a credential of value that can support employment, postsecondary education, or both.[2] This white paper considers how First Credential can build on the strengths of the Mountainland region's workforce-readiness ecosystem while making that ecosystem easier for students to navigate.

## The Mountainland Region's Workforce-Readiness Landscape

The Mountainland region already has many of the major components of a strong workforce-readiness system. K–12 schools introduce students to career and technical pathways, counseling, and concurrent enrollment. Technical colleges provide hands-on training and short-term credentials connected to employment. Universities provide credit-bearing pathways, advising, transfer opportunities, and workforce-connected learning. Workforce agencies connect people to labor-market information, training, internships, on-the-job experiences, and employment support. Community education, ESL programs, GEAR UP, and other outreach efforts create additional entry points for students and families.

Stakeholders repeatedly described the region as collaborative and supported by strong relationships across institutional boundaries. School districts, technical colleges, universities, workforce agencies, community programs, and industry partners already work together in many ways. The region also offers students multiple entry points into education and workforce preparation rather than a single prescribed route.

Future policy should build from the programs, relationships, and local practices that are already working. At the same time, a system can be robust from an institutional perspective and yet still be difficult for a student or family to understand. The existence of many options does not automatically make the connections between those options clear.

## The Student Experience—Where a Strong System Can Still Feel Fragmented

Students move through a landscape that crosses schools, counselors, technical colleges, universities, workforce programs, employers, and families. Each part of that landscape has differing responsibilities and measures of success. While the organizations themselves may collaborate, students do not always experience those relationships as one connected pathway.

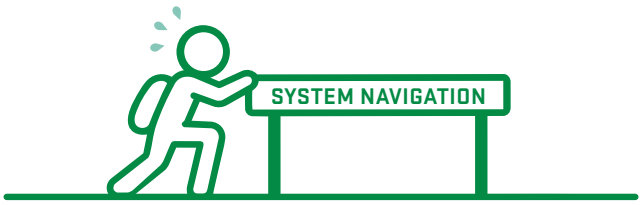
A student may speak with multiple counselors, participate in several programs, earn different types of credit, or complete a credential without having a clear picture of how those pieces fit together. Students may not know whether a course counts toward a certificate, whether a technical certificate connects to a degree, whether prior credits will transfer, or whether a pathway leads toward employment that fits their goals.

Students can also lose continuity as they move between programs and institutions. Information about their goals, interests, barriers, and prior experiences is not always shared across those transitions, which can lead to repeated intake and advising conversations, creating moments where students feel as though they are starting over.

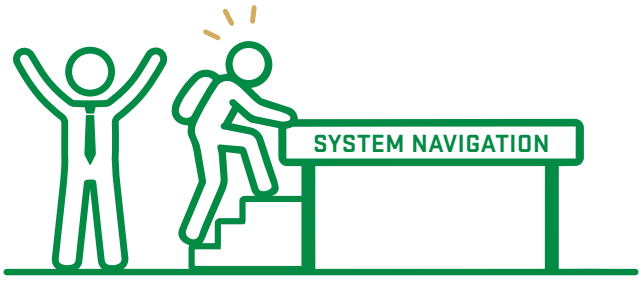
Those challenges are not experienced equally. Some students have parents, counselors, mentors, or family members who know how to navigate education and workforce systems, while others may not know which questions to ask or which opportunities exist. Students who are first-generation, lower income, from multilingual households or rural communities , unsure of their career goals, returning after stepping away, or balancing work and caregiving may face additional friction.

The student-facing challenge is not a lack of programs, but creating visibility, navigation, and continuity across programs that already exist.

### Students in a Fragmented System




### Students in a Supportive System



## First Credential and the Existing System

HB 260 and the First Credential Master Plan add a new policy emphasis to this existing landscape. The goal is to help students graduate from high school with a credential of value that can connect to employment, further education, or both.[3] In the Mountainland region, that goal aligns with work already underway through CTE, concurrent enrollment, technical education, higher education, workforce programs, and industry partnerships.

The implementation question is therefore not whether the region can create workforce-readiness opportunities. Many already exist. The question is whether students can understand where the First Credential program fits within a larger pathway and what comes next. A credential is more useful when students can see whether it leads directly to work, builds toward additional technical training, transfers into further education, or supports a longer-term career goal.

Viewed this way, First Credential can strengthen the existing ecosystem by giving students a meaningful first step within a broader pathway. Its success will depend in part on the connective infrastructure around that step—continuity of information, visible pathways, clear handoffs, and the ability to change direction without unnecessarily starting over.

# 3 Priorities for Strengthening the Student Pathway

## Priority One: Create Continuity Across Student Transitions

One of the clearest needs from the interviews is continuity as students move between programs, counselors, schools, and institutions. Students should not have to repeatedly reconstruct their goals, interests, experiences, and support needs at every transition.

A transferable or appropriately connected student profile could help preserve relevant context over time. Depending on the setting and appropriate privacy protections, that profile could include—

- Career interests
- Long-term goals
- Credentials earned
- Pathway participation
- Work-based learning experiences
- Transfer intentions
- Mentorship involvement
- Barriers and support needs
- Changes in direction over time

Since students' educational and career plans change, the purpose would be continuity, not early tracking into a fixed path. A useful profile could help advisors and students understand what has already happened and what options remain available while preserving local institutional decision-making.

## Priority Two: Support Early Exploration and Visible, Flexible Pathways

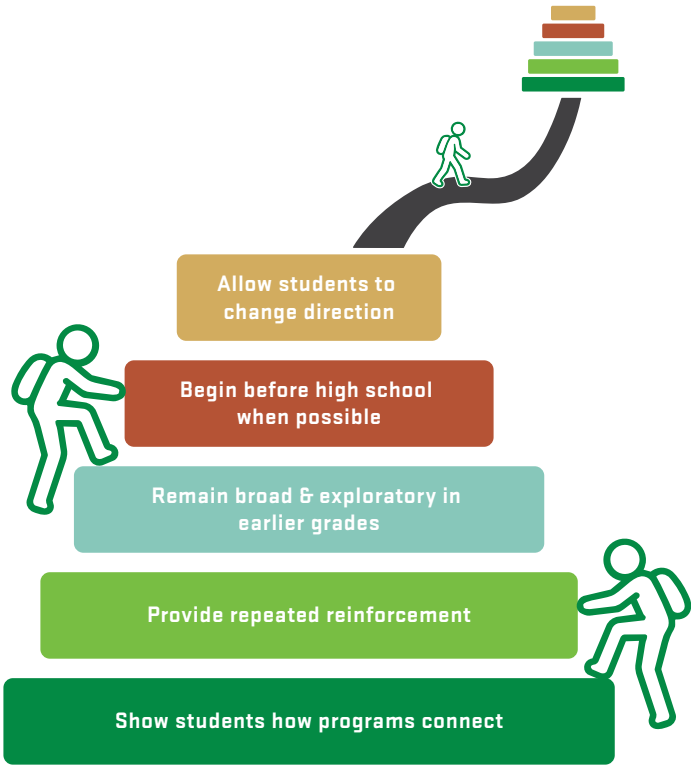
Students need more than a one-time introduction to a program or career. They need repeated opportunities to understand their interests, aptitudes, and strengths, and to connect that self-knowledge to possible education and workforce pathways.

Aptitude, interest, and career-exploration tools can provide an early foundation for this work by helping students identify abilities and possible connections to careers. This type of self-discovery did not emerge consistently across our stakeholder interviews. Though this does not mean that the work itself is absent, it suggests that its role within the broader pathway system may not be equally visible to all the groups helping students navigate that system.

A stronger exploration process would—

- Begin before high school when possible
- Remain broad and exploratory in earlier grades
- Become more specific as students develop clearer interests and goals
- Provide repeated reinforcement rather than one-off events
- Show students how credentials, programs, and careers connect
- Allow students to change direction without treating a new choice as a complete restart

Early pathway work should therefore be broad enough to support exploration, while later guidance can become more targeted. This approach recognizes the diversity of higher education, technical education, and workforce options without asking students to make overly narrow choices too early.



## Priority Three: Strengthen Handoffs Across Existing Systems

Many successful transitions currently depend on people who know one another, understand multiple systems, and take extra steps to help students. Those relationships are a strength, but students should be able to move successfully between organizations without having to encounter the right person at the right time.

Existing systems could support more consistent handoffs through—

- Shared or linked advising information where appropriate
- Clearer articulation maps between CTE, technical college, and university pathways
- Pathway dashboards that show students and advisors what a credential can lead to next
- Clear responsibility for helping students at major transition points
- Clear processes for students who change pathways
- Ongoing pathway maintenance rather than one-time planning

This is not an argument for a one-size-fits-all structure or greater central control. Districts, technical colleges, universities, workforce partners, and communities serve different populations and operate under different constraints. The goal is to make student movement between those locally responsive systems easier without flattening the differences that allow them to meet local needs.

## Structural Conditions That Shape Student Pathways

Improving student navigation also requires attention to several conditions that influence how well the pieces of the system connect. These issues do not necessarily reflect a lack of effort or collaboration. In many cases, they result from institutions operating under different missions, requirements, and incentives.

## Incentives and Measures of Success

K–12 schools balance graduation requirements, staffing, scheduling, and parent expectations. Counselors manage academic planning alongside crisis response and other student needs. Universities balance enrollment, retention, graduation, academic priorities, and workforce alignment. Technical colleges and workforce programs are often more directly tied to labor-market demand and employability. Employers focus on immediate and future workforce needs, while students and families may prioritize affordability, flexibility, or immediate income.

Each of those priorities is understandable within its own setting. Problems can emerge, however, when measures of success do not align around the student's movement between systems. Even highly collaborative organizations can create fragmented outcomes when incentives reward different endpoints.

## Articulation and Stackability

First Credential depends in part on the idea that early credentials can lead somewhere.[4] Yet credits and credentials earned through technical pathways do not always transfer cleanly into later degree pathways. When students have to repeat courses or cannot see how one credential builds toward the next, technical and higher education can feel like separate endpoints rather than connected options.

## Industry Engagement

Many programs already have formal and durable connections to industry. Technical colleges commonly use program advisory boards, including structures required through accreditation, and many career and technical programs in higher education also use industry input to shape programs. Other institutions and programs have strengthened formal advisory processes in recent years.

The remaining challenge is variation in how visible, consistent, and connected employer engagement is across the broader student pathway.

## Family and Community Awareness

Families remain a major influence on students' education and career decisions, but not every family has the same familiarity with credentials, technical education, concurrent enrollment, transfer, or workforce pathways. When families lack that information, students can become more dependent on counselors and institutional staff who are already balancing many responsibilities.

Sustained communication with families is therefore part of making the broader ecosystem visible to students.

## What This Means Going Forward

The Mountainland region does not need a major overhaul. The interviews point instead to a need for stronger connections around an already substantial workforce-readiness ecosystem. As First Credential moves forward, implementation should focus on making existing opportunities easier for students to understand, enter, build on, and move between.

The strongest opportunities for improvement are to—

- Create greater continuity around student goals, experiences, and prior learning
- Make pathways and next steps easier for students and families to see
- Support earlier exploration tied to student interests, aptitudes, and strengths
- Strengthen handoffs and articulation across existing systems
- Align incentives more closely with successful student transitions
- Preserve local flexibility while improving visibility across institutional boundaries

## Conclusion

The Mountainland region already has institutions, programs, partnerships, and leaders providing meaningful workforce-readiness opportunities. Our interviews suggest that the challenge is to help students experience those opportunities as parts of a broader pathway they can understand and navigate.

HB 260 and the First Credential Master Plan create an opportunity to build on that foundation. If implementation strengthens continuity, pathway visibility, exploration, articulation, and handoffs while preserving the flexibility of local institutions, First Credential can reinforce work that is already happening across the region.

The opportunity is not to replace the existing ecosystem, but to make its strengths more visible and useful to the students moving through it.

# Endnotes

1. The authors conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in Utah's Mountainland region between February and April 2026. Participants included leaders from K–12 school districts, technical colleges, universities, workforce agencies, community education, and outreach programs. To encourage candid responses, interviewees are not identified by name.
2. H.B. 260, First Credential Program, 2025 Gen. Sess. (Utah 2025), https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/HB0260.html; Utah First Credential Oversight Committee, *First Credential Master Plan*, version 1 (Salt Lake City: Utah State Legislature, November 2025), 3, https://le.utah.gov/interim/2025/pdf/00004476.pdf.
3. Utah First Credential Oversight Committee, *First Credential Master Plan*, 3–4.
4. Utah First Credential Oversight Committee, *First Credential Master Plan*, 11.


### Gary R. Herbert Institute Staff and Advisors

LEADERSHIP TEAM
Gary R. Herbert, Founder, 17th Governor of Utah
Justin Jones, MS, Senior Director
Jonathan Barton, Project Specialist
David Connelly, PhD, Research Director, Associate Professor, History/Political Science
Karen Gill, Events Director
Jim Moss, EdD, JD, Professional in Residence, Constitutional Federalism Initiative
Erik Nystul, MPA, Program Director, Government Internships
Becca Aylworth Wright, Director of Academic Engagement and Publications

ASSOCIATED LEADERS
Dan Dimond, Sr. Director Institutional Advancement, UVU Foundation
Liv Moffat, Development Director, Herbert Foundation

FACULTY FELLOWS
Tara B. B. Bishop, PhD, Assist. Prof. Earth Science / Enviro Mgmt., Earth Sciences
Alan Parry, PhD, Assoc. Prof. Mathematics
George Rudolph, PhD, Chair/Professor, Computer Science
Majid Memari, PhD, Assistant Professor, Computer Science
David Benson, PhD, Assistant Professor of Strategy, Management
Hilary Hungerford, PhD, Associate Professor of Geography
Paul Monson, AIA, NCARB, Assistant Professor of Architecture

### Workforce Alignment Staff

Wendy Simmerman, M.Ed.; Senior Director-Workforce Alignment
Stefanie Adams, MS; Director-Regional Pathways
Miki Brent, MS; Director-Articulations and Extended Programming
Colleen Sorenson, MBA; Director-Workforce Learning
Scott G. Snow, MPA; Director-Career & Technical Education (CTE)
Wesley Thomas; Coordinator II-CTE Programs
Brianna Kilner; Coordinator II-CTE Pathways

STUDENT FELLOWS
Fatma Ibrahim Ademhamed
Katelyn Telles

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
Julie Thornley; Administrative Support III

RESEARCH ASSISTANTS
Reese Boardman, Data Governance
Karissa Gillespie, Mail-in Ballot Study
Xander Greenwood, Utah Lake/Conservation
Josh Hadlock, Data Governance AI Developer
Jaxon Hill, Mail-in Ballot Study
Ethan Howlett, Data Governance AI Developer
Anthony Jankovic, Data Governance AI Developer
Suzette Johnson, Mail-in Ballot Study
Avery LaGiglia, Mail-in Ballot Study
Keomony Mary, Synthetic Data Project
Christ Hermes Louyoko Nianza, Federalism Intergovernmental/GIS Mapping
Bradley Smith, Data Governance
Dori Whitehead, Mail-in Ballot Study

EVENT ASSISTANTS
Emilee Cook
Jade Haymore
Elayna Saley

COMMUNICATIONS/GRAPHIC DESIGN ASSISTANTS
Catalina Aroca Baquero, Social Media
Katherin Brough, Graphic Design
Alexa Herrera, Communications
Kaitlyn Mayo, Graphic Design
Sophia Otis, Web Designer
Brooke Peterson, Graphic Design
Rebecca Whyte, Communications

GARY • INSTITUTE