

CTE and Career Readiness in *Northwest Arkansas*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Insightful Education Solutions



ONE BIG THING



Misalignment between pathway offerings and workforce needs, paired with interest and enthusiasm from industry and education partners, **presents opportunity** to **expand access** to high-quality K-12 career pathway programs in Northwest Arkansas (NWA).

BACKGROUND



High-quality career and technical education (CTE) programs lead to regional advancement and economic mobility when they align with regional economic needs and provide K-12 students the knowledge, skills and credentials they need for postsecondary success. As in many regions, NWA school districts offer students a range of CTE pathways to pursue based on their interests. To understand the quality and accessibility of those programs in NWA, Insightful convened a local advisory group, examined public enrollment and program quality data and conducted focus groups and surveys with educators and K-12 students.



A SHARED DEFINITION OF HIGH QUALITY

A high-quality CTE pathway is a sequence of aligned, interconnected academic and workforce experiences that enable learners to master a particular subject, set of competencies or program, earn one or more employer-valued credentials and go on to pursue a job with a sustainable wage.



A HIGH-QUALITY CTE PATHWAY SHOULD:

- Align with high-demand, high-skill and higher-wage (H³) sectors and occupations
- Reflect courses that are sequential and progressive
- Include courses and/or exams eligible for early postsecondary credit and align with postsecondary credentialed programs
- Offer credentials valued by employers
- Include robust standards that represent the necessary academic, technical and employability knowledge and skills and
- Incorporate a continuum of work-based learning experiences.

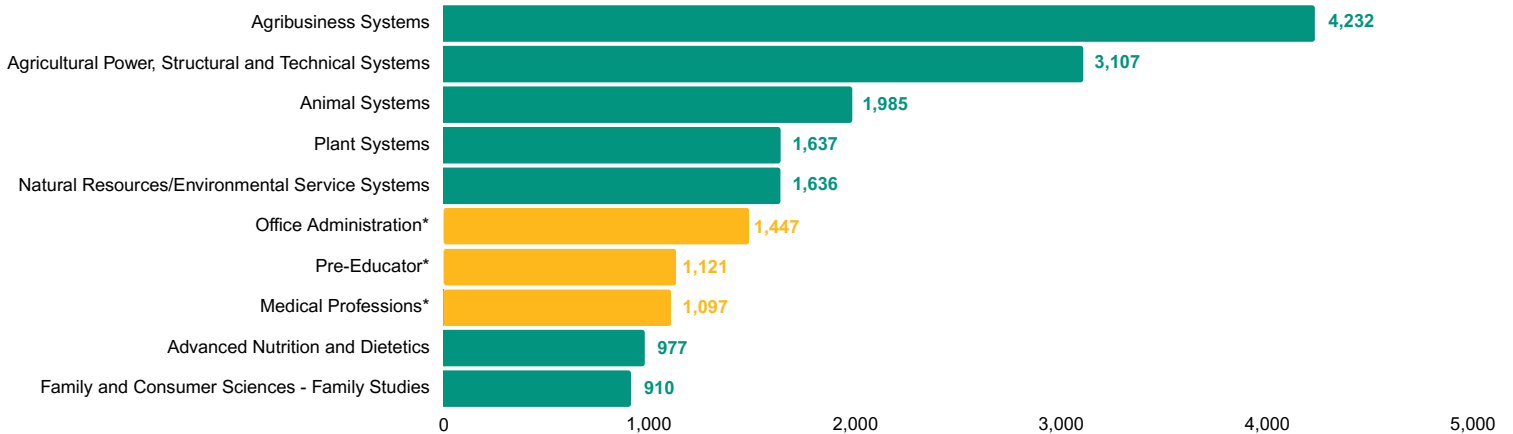


KEY FINDINGS

#1 There is significant misalignment between workforce needs and CTE pathway completions by students.

Just three* of the region's top 10 completed CTE pathways are aligned with high-demand, high-skill and higher-wage occupations. In contrast, the top five completed pathways are in agriculture-related fields. Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting industry sectors make up only 1.2% of the overall workforce in NWA.

Top 10 Programs of Study by Completions (2020-2022)



The top three sectors featuring high-skill and higher-wage occupations that are projected to grow the most in the next five years are Healthcare and Social Assistance (3,621 jobs), Management of Companies and Enterprises (2,495 jobs) and Manufacturing (2,119 jobs). By comparison, regional jobs in the agriculture sector are projected to grow by only 180 jobs over this same period.

#2

Too few K-12 student CTE completers are achieving key elements associated with pathway quality. The share of students achieving these elements varies widely across the most completed programs of study. Early postsecondary credit had the highest attainment rate across all programs; however, it is still relatively low.



Percent of completers that achieve **Industry Certification**, **Postsecondary Matriculation** or **Early Postsecondary Credit** varies widely across programs



#3

Despite challenges in CTE pathway alignment and quality, there is overwhelming enthusiasm and support for CTE along with a desire for more diverse and better program offerings. Logistical challenges, finding qualified staff and having adequate program funding were all identified as obstacles to overcome at the district and school levels. However, 100% of educators surveyed believe that CTE is as important for students as math, English, social studies and science.



RECOMMENDATIONS



Given the enthusiasm for CTE and the identified labor shortages, regional partners should focus efforts to build out CTE programming in NWA in Healthcare, Advanced Manufacturing, Marketing/Distribution/Logistics, Building/Construction, Business Management and Administration and Education and Training. The full report provides details on what each of these archetypes should look like.



Any strategy to improve CTE should be grounded in the common definition for high-quality pathways that improve student outcomes and align with economic and workforce needs and priorities.



Developing consistent cross-region CTE pathways will require shared resources, economies of scale and a shift away from "go it alone" approaches.



Further analysis is needed around the longer-term return on investment of current NWA CTE programs for learners (including outcomes such as postsecondary credential attainment, employment and wage earnings, etc.).