American Council on Education

Dual Mission Institutions: Bridging Traditional and Workforce Learning for Regional Impact

CONTRIBUTORS

Matthew Williams

Miya Simpson

Austin Freeman

Derrick Anderson

Hironao Okahana

Gailda Pitre Davis

American Council on Education
One Dupont Circle NW
Washington, DC 20036

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Executive Summary

Dual mission institutions (DMIs) represent a growing number of colleges and universities that advance—within a single institution—two distinctive approaches to postsecondary learning: the first involves traditional bachelor's degree programs, and the second involves associate-level and nondegree workforce training offerings. Comprising a subset of community colleges and regional comprehensive institutions, DMIs are distinguished by innovative approaches to credentialing that enable seamless transferability between associate degree, bachelor's degree, and nondegree tracks; a commitment to open access and affordability; and a strong regional focus, including deep partnerships with local employers and industry. While there is considerable variation in the operations of DMIs, the duality of their missions is a unifying design feature.

The first mission of the dual mission model is traditional in nature, combining courses that lead to degree attainment in alignment with regional accreditation standards and with comprehensive national policy frameworks such as the Higher Education Act (HEA). Offerings through this mission include fields such as math, science, literature, and the arts and are similar to those of colleges and universities nationwide. The second mission is nontraditional and is characterized by certificates, nondegree credentials, and career-anchored associate degrees. These offerings are aligned with the specific career and technical training needs of the local workforce and supported through local, state, and regional policy frameworks for economic and workforce development. DMIs closely collaborate with industry partners to ensure the quality of the curriculum offered through this mission, and feedback between their educational offerings and workforce needs is tightly coupled.

The dual mission approach challenges widely held assumptions in postsecondary learning, especially the belief that a linear pathway leading to a bachelor's degree is the optimal form of participation for every learner. In addition to the fusion of its two distinctive missions, dual mission institutions facilitate nonlinear patterns of learning through innovative credentialing practices that allow learners to simultaneously pursue and seamlessly transition between traditional and nontraditional pathways.

This white paper explores the dual mission model by drawing on interviews with the presidents of eight institutions of higher learning that have publicly described themselves as dual mission institutions. These presidents have advocated for greater awareness and understanding of this approach, and their perspectives are critical to understanding what makes the model unique and what challenges must be overcome to fulfill DMIs' potential for impact. Though eight institutions are featured herein, it is likely that there are numerous other DMIs across the U.S. higher education landscape as well as other institutions that are poised to leverage the dual mission model to become more sustainable and achieve greater impact.

The American Council on Education (ACE) is supporting this community of institutions and promoting its success by helping to establish a strong evidence base around the collective impact of DMIs, address key policy obstacles for DMIs, and facilitate increased connectivity among DMIs. Collaboration with DMIs to advance these activities will help to achieve greater awareness, recognition, and legitimization of the dual mission model and to create a supportive environment for its maturation and growth, which in turn will help these institutions to improve livelihoods, drive socioeconomic mobility, reinvigorate local economies, and strengthen local communities.

The Rise of Alternative Higher Education Models

The Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) has had a profound and far-reaching impact in shaping higher education in the United States. From establishing financial aid programs to ensuring gender equality and consumer protection, the HEA and its successive reauthorizations have influenced the postsecondary learning experience by developing new opportunities and safeguards that create significant benefits for learners. The HEA increased

financial access to postsecondary education through programs such as Pell Grants, Stafford Loans, and work-study opportunities and further improved affordability through initiatives that include income-based repayment plans and loan forgiveness programs to alleviate student debt burdens. By addressing the financial needs of students from socioeconomically underprivileged backgrounds, these programs have had an outsized impact on historically marginalized populations. The HEA has also benefitted minority student populations in more direct ways by formalizing recognition of minority serving institutions and allocating funds specifically to assist them, including through Title III and Title V provisions as well as other capacity-building mechanisms such as the Strengthening Institutions Program and the Minority Science and Engineering Improvement Program.

The HEA has also accelerated the growth of the U.S. higher education system and encouraged a greater diversity of institutional types. Total enrollment at degree-granting institutions tripled from 1965 to 2019, growing from 6.5 million to 19 million students (NCES 2023); during the same time, the number of degree-granting institutions also increased from 4,000 to 6,200 (NCES 2023). Most significantly, the HEA established frameworks for accrediting agencies to ensure academic quality and standards at institutions of higher education. Combined with the HEA's facilitation of federal support for institutions through grants, research funding, and programs that strengthen academic and infrastructural capacity, the HEA-driven accreditation process has influenced institutional behavior by defining quality standards, helping to determine eligibility for federal aid, and establishing accountability mechanisms. Colleges and universities continue to look to guidelines established by the HEA to inform strategic planning, resource allocation, and curriculum development.

Although accreditation has led colleges and universities to prioritize quality assurance, accountability, and continuous improvement according to common standards, it has arguably decreased incentives for institutions to take risks and innovate. Accreditation guidelines and the federal policies upon which they are based influence not only the ways in which colleges and universities operate but also how they define themselves. By its very nature, accreditation acts as an isomorphic pressure that incentivizes close adherence to common standards across institutional types, which may have the unintended consequence of decreasing institutions' willingness to experiment and respond to local needs.

In recent years, America's higher education ecosystem has begun adapting to emerging social and economic demands that present challenges for traditional institutions as shaped by the HEA. These demands are felt most deeply at the local level, especially by employers who face difficulty in finding graduates with skills that meet their specific workforce needs as well as by a growing number of learners whose needs are less suited to currently available postsecondary educational options. These learners include nontraditional, adult learners; learners with some college but no credential; learners who wish to obtain credentials validating marketable skills but lack the time or resources to complete a bachelor's degree; and learners who seek to simultaneously earn a bachelor's degree and a workforce-oriented credential. These forces are stimulating the development of novel postsecondary approaches, including alternative pathways such as apprenticeships and microcredentials that aim to meet industry-specific needs, and more flexible, competency-based learning models. Although some of these innovative approaches are led by the private sector, they are also advanced by traditional colleges and universities—even in the absence of federal incentives or mandates. The dual mission model is an example of this trend, representing institutionally driven innovation in response to evolving social and economic dynamics rather than policy incentives.

Defining the Dual Mission Approach

The postsecondary sector comprises a multiplicity of institutional types that can be categorized in numerous ways. One such categorization is based on the fundamental aim toward which an institution orients its instructional programming—in particular, whether its purpose is to produce graduates at the baccalaureate

level or provide credentials and education at the subbaccalaureate level. The first purpose can be described as *mission one*, which includes the traditional teaching and learning activities common to bachelor's degree-granting colleges and universities that terminate in the award of a baccalaureate degree. The second purpose, *mission two*, represents career-oriented associate degrees and technical or vocational training programs that culminate in a certificate or other credential. All institutions of higher learning in the United States serve one of these two missions. Table 1 illustrates the different credentials and institutional types that correspond to both missions.

TABLE 1. MISSION ONE AND MISSION TWO: CORRESPONDING CREDENTIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL TYPES

	Credential Awarded	Institutional Type
Mission One	Baccalaureate degrees	Research universities; regional comprehensive institutions
Mission Two	Associate degrees and nondegree credentials	Community colleges; some regional comprehensive institutions; technical colleges; alternative providers

Dual mission institutions have arisen as a novel, nontraditional model that carries out both missions within a single institution, simultaneously providing access to associate, bachelor's, and nondegree pathways. DMIs have an explicit focus on meeting the needs of contemporary learners and responding to local and regional workforce needs. They act as a one-stop shop that enables seamless transferability between programs, thereby helping to fix the "leaky pipeline" between mission two institutions that offer subbaccalaureate degrees and mission one institutions that grant bachelor's degrees. Additionally, DMIs leverage stackable credentials and flexible pathways to accommodate nonlinear educational journeys that defy traditional patterns of associate and bachelor's degree attainment. Associate and nondegree programs are not treated as stepping stones to a bachelor's degree, and several DMI leaders argue that the model renders the concept of associate and bachelor's degrees—the critical distinction between missions one and two—obsolete.

Although DMIs maintain traditional bachelor's degree programs in disciplines that lack an explicit career focus, many credential pathways at DMIs expressly aim to enable job readiness and career advancement in local industries. Credential pathways are often developed in collaboration with local and regional employers to have deliberate alignment between curriculum and skills demand, aiming to ensure day-one job readiness upon completion of a credential. Pedagogical practice at DMIs is also heavily geared toward the acquisition of skills that have value in the labor market, and it commonly includes integration of hands-on learning experiences—often with direct participation from industry stakeholders and facilitated by in-kind contributions.

The core innovation of the dual mission model is not that it accommodates both mission one and mission two but that it challenges the traditional boundaries between them. Because the two missions are anchored to different institutional types, the dual mission model represents a new way of thinking and categorizing institutions, irrespective of whether a given DMI also falls into other established categories such as regional comprehensive institution or community college. To understand the implications of this fusion, it is first necessary to explore the classic distinction between mission one and mission two.

Mission One Versus Mission Two in Traditional Colleges and Universities

The most apparent distinction between mission one and mission two is the type of credential offered, which has wide-ranging implications across all institutional functions. An institution's commitment to a given mission defines its identity and informs its strategic decision-making, operations, recruitment and enrollment practices, student services model, approach to partnering with other institutions and employers, and much more. Perhaps most significantly, the mission-defined institutional purpose determines the institution's relationship to educational policy.

At the federal level, all mission one and most mission two institutions are heavily influenced by HEA policy in that they are bound to U.S. Department of Education oversight and HEA-based regulatory frameworks; however, a subset of mission two institutions and providers, such as technical colleges and alternative providers, may operate outside of these boundaries. The HEA helps to determine how learners fund their learning experiences in programs within both missions through Title IV aid. But at mission two institutions, only those students who are seeking an associate degree are eligible for federal aid, while those who are pursuing nondegree tracks are self-funded or may be supported by institutional scholarships through state and local grants. Respective to federal policy, the greatest distinction between mission one and mission two institutions is that those within the former—especially research-oriented universities—receive a relatively greater share of their revenue and operating expenses from federal sources. The community colleges and technical colleges composing mission two are much more dependent upon state funding, and alternative providers are largely tuition-funded.

The traditional baccalaureate programs of mission one offer learners the ability to develop broad, general competencies within a field as well as a defined track toward further specialization through graduate studies. Programs in mission two address more focused needs. Some credentials at the associate level will provide pathways into bachelor's degrees, whereas other associate and nondegree credentials offer a more rapid and targeted approach to skills development that addresses specific, localized, and urgent market needs. The skills training provided by these tracks may not be transferable to the baccalaureate level; for example, there is no bridge between a medical assistant associate degree and a bachelor of science in nursing. Additionally, mission one optimizes for flexibility and well-rounded graduates, whereas mission two optimizes for job-specific competencies. An automotive engineer, for example, is equipped to design new engines, whereas an automotive engineering technologist is equipped to manufacture them. The relatively greater specialization and complexity of knowledge offered in mission one programs requires a slower approach to curricular change and longer course of study. Mission two's connection to skills required for implementation and execution enable much shorter training time and potentially enables shorter curricular development timespans—albeit with relatively limited horizons for graduates, at least in the near-term. Table 2 illustrates the distinctions between mission one and mission two across traditional institutions.

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL MISSION ONE AND MISSION TWO CHARACTERISTICS

	Mission One: Baccalaureate	Mission Two: Workforce Development
Credential Type	Bachelor's degree	Associate degree, certificate, or other credential
Primary Purpose	Medium- and long-term job readiness; bachelor's degree attainment; preparation for graduate studies	Immediate job readiness; career advancement; preparation for bachelor's degree programs
Market and Workforce Demand Drivers	Demand for workers with broad competencies	Demand for workers with job-specific skills
Educational Aim	Critical thinking, adaptable foundation for specialization	Competency-oriented thinking; narrow specialization
Length of Study	4–6 years	1–24 months

Beyond Missions One and Two: Dual Mission Institution Characteristics

Dual mission institutions serve mission one and mission two at high scale, enrolling a significant number of students in programs across both missions—but importantly, four qualitative distinctions set them apart from traditional institutions. These distinctions emerge from embracing both purposes and challenging the boundaries between them. Dual mission institutions are distinguished by a strong regional focus, a unique credentialing approach, robust relationships with employers and K–12 systems, and a deep commitment to accessibility. Although all DMIs fall within various existing postsecondary classifications, no current taxonomy assesses this pattern of institutional activity and performance across these parameters or enables the identification and categorization of DMIs across the U.S. higher education landscape.

REGIONAL FOCUS

By definition, dual mission institutions maintain a regional focus. This is because the programs that define mission two are inherently oriented toward regional and local needs by imputing skills and providing credentials that learners need to access regional and local opportunities. All institutions in the U.S. that currently identify as dual mission can be found among two kinds of colleges and universities that are regional- and local-serving institutions:

- Community college baccalaureate colleges (CCB colleges)
- Regional comprehensive institutions (RCIs)

Both types of institutions aim to serve local communities, achieve state-level priorities, and provide accessible postsecondary programs through flexible admissions policies and affordable tuition rates. They play differentiated but complementary roles in the U.S. higher education landscape. The focus of community colleges is to provide workforce training, associate degrees, and transfer pathways to baccalaureate degree-granting institutions. In 1989, West Virginia became the first state to authorize CCB programs (Love, Bragg, and Harmon 2021), and the number of community colleges that offer CCBs has grown significantly since that time. As of 2023, the number of public CCB colleges has grown to 187 in 23 states across the U.S. (CCBA 2024a; CCBA 2024b).

RCIs serve as anchor institutions that provide access to bachelor's degrees, especially for economically disadvantaged, nontraditional, and racial and ethnic minority learners and in geographies that are distant from research universities and state flagships (Orphan and McClure 2019). The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) estimates that there are 517 colleges and universities across the U.S. that can be considered as RCIs (AASCU 2023).

The regional focus of DMIs is the foundation that underpins their other intrinsic characteristics and informs practices that support them, including in innovative credentialing, employer and K–12 partnerships, and accessibility for local learners. Strong regionality also leads to deeper connections between learners and their communities; for example, one DMI president reported that 77 percent of the institution's alumni remained in the community 10 years after their graduation.

Colorado Mountain College: Responding to Local Needs Leads to Hispanic-Serving Institution Status

Colorado Mountain College's (CMC) journey to becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) began with its shift to the localized approach that defines the dual mission model. A decade ago, CMC operated as a traditional community college and struggled to differentiate itself. Like many colleges, CMC aimed to recruit out-of-state

students and offered programs that were largely similar to other institutions, placing CMC in competition with RCIs. Carrie Besnette Hauser, then president of CMC, recognized that this approach was unsustainable and initiated a pivot to make the institution more focused on the needs of the communities served by its 11 campuses, particularly by creating and strengthening programs in high-demand fields such as nursing. For many learners, CMC is the "only option in our region . . . so we have to—by virtue of the fact that there aren't other alternatives—offer a mix of programs," including in career and technical education as well as the liberal arts, said Hauser. CMC's effort to meet local needs also included expanding high school relationships, resulting in a doubling of concurrent enrollment students and making CMC the first choice for many. Consequently, the percentage of local students attending CMC increased dramatically from around 50 percent to 90 percent today.

This local focus had the unintended yet positive consequence of tapping into a large Hispanic population within CMC's communities, and the growth of this demographic resulted in CMC being designated as an HSI in 2021. Hispanic students now compose a significant portion of students at CMC in multiple programs, such as human services and teacher education, in which Hispanic enrollment is currently 80 to 90 percent. CMC's leaders attribute their success in reaching Hispanic students to providing relevant courses at the right times and in the right locations. CMC has scaled up its ESL programs, which currently enroll 1,500 students, and also offers multiple courses in Spanish or bilingual formats. Hispanic students now succeed at rates that surpass those of their peer groups and have a higher persistence rate that exceeds that of their non-Hispanic counterparts. Matt Gianneschi, president of CMC, described success with Hispanic students as an outgrowth of CMC's efforts to "focus on immediate communities in your backyard and say, 'What do they need?' Because if we're training students to just leave, it's a transactional relationship. We should think about how we become transformational for these communities and become so relevant to our communities that they can't live without us."

INNOVATIVE CREDENTIALING APPROACHES

By offering a wide range of credentials at multiple levels under one roof, dual mission institutions blur the boundaries between institutional types. They accommodate nonlinear patterns of learning and creative approaches to learners' educational journeys that allow them to pursue a wide range of learner aspirations and provide the flexibility for creative patterns of credential attainment.

The ability for students to follow clear pathways from subbaccalaureate and nondegree credential pathways to bachelor's degrees—should they desire to do so—is intrinsic to the dual mission model. DMIs emphasize flexibility and mobility between programs, and most offer stackable credentials, which help students to persist in and complete higher levels of education with less effort. The dual mission model also removes the need for a transfer pathway by allowing students to complete their bachelor's degrees at the same institution where they earned associate degrees or nondegree credentials.

The credentialing practices of DMIs reflect a different ethos around credential value and the purpose of education itself. DMI leaders interviewed by ACE resoundingly affirmed the idea that learners have varying needs at different times in their educational journeys, and they argued that bachelor's degree attainment should not be presumed to be the primary aim of postsecondary education. They also described their efforts to elevate learners' sense of pride in associate and nondegree credentials. One DMI president described the dual mission model as "the non-prejudicial model of education," as it affirms the value of diverse forms of learning and credential attainment rather than assuming that a linear journey to a baccalaureate degree is the optimal trajectory. For some learners, an associate degree or nondegree credential may be the best pathway, even if they are equipped to earn a bachelor's degree.

DMI presidents also reported that their approach to credentialing leads to surprising learner choices that reflect different campus cultures and student mindsets as a result of greater flexibility and encouragement of

nontraditional educational journeys. While bachelor's degrees still hold appeal for many students at DMIs, the alignment of associate degree programs with immediate job pathways encourages many to begin their studies in pursuit of an associate degree without the pressure to work toward a bachelor's degree. Some learners on a bachelor's degree track ultimately obtain two associate degrees, while other learners begin with the intention of earning an associate degree but ultimately go on to obtain a bachelor's degree within the same institution. Atypical patterns of credential attainment are not uncommon; for example, one DMI president reported a trend of students with "fancy bachelor's degrees from all over the place [who] enroll in associate degrees" to obtain jobs that are locally in demand.

STRONG EMPLOYER AND INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

The dual mission model's focus on post-attainment employability and local workforce development leads DMIs to cultivate close, multifaceted partnerships with local industries and employers. This collaboration takes many forms, and the DMI leaders interviewed by ACE all reported that industry partnerships are central to their missions. At DMIs, industry stakeholders are deeply involved in curriculum design, allowing both degree and noncredit workforce programs to more directly address current and evolving workforce needs and helping learners to obtain the skills to meet them. Institutional collaboration with industry involves communication from the level of executive administration to administrative units, academic departments, and individual faculty members. While industry relations may not be fully centralized and may not be carried out at all levels across every DMI, a common theme is that relationships are demand-driven and mutually beneficial for institutions, employers, and learners.

At the executive level, collaboration is facilitated across DMIs through mechanisms such as the formation of advisory boards and chief executive officer (CEO) councils as well as by leveraging relationships with trustees, which allows local employers to provide guidance to DMIs in developing new academic programs and aligning existing programs with industry trends. Some DMIs colocate employers on campus, enabling integration of their personnel in hands-on learning experiences and providing recruitment opportunities. Others employ dedicated pathways coordinators who solidify relationships between employers, high schools, and technical colleges. One DMI has adopted a reverse recruiting model that proactively identifies skilled graduates and connects them with suitable employers.

The goal of ensuring employability for graduates also entails a significantly different approach to designing new programs at dual mission institutions, emphasizing market-skills fit as a key consideration in addition to enrollment growth potential. Although DMIs continue to offer mission one programs without an explicit focus on applied skills—including tracks in the liberal arts, social sciences, and interdisciplinary and general studies—several DMI leaders emphasized that new programs are never developed apart from consideration of employability and skills that are relevant in the local market. In the words of one DMI leader, "We don't design new programs without industry. We do not launch programs that do not lead to sustainable wage careers. We have a regional economic reality that we have to lean into."

Dickinson State University: Strengthening Institutional Sustainability Through Industry Ties

Dickinson State University's (DSU) experience in developing industry partnerships exemplifies the dual mission approach. Under the leadership of President Steve Easton, DSU has prioritized development of programs tailored to industry demand. "Every single one of those programs was identified outside the university itself as something that we should do," said Easton. Local employers assist DSU in curriculum development and provide resources to support career training programs, especially equipment for hands-on training. DSU's industry ties also facilitate the employment of students while they are still enrolled, which provides students with work experience and

further strengthens the institution's relationships with local employers. The success of this approach at DSU has led Easton to see mission two programs as critical to his institution's financial sustainability, and he believes that embracing mission two will help institutions across the higher education sector stay relevant. Easton predicts that "in 10 or so years, if you're not significantly involved in career and technical education, it's going to be really difficult to survive . . . . I don't think people are going to have the luxury of just being a traditional, pre–dual mission institution."

ACCESSIBILITY

Educational accessibility is a primary goal of dual mission institutions. All of the institutions interviewed by ACE maintain open admissions policies, are committed to the success of access students who may not be ready for college, and provide credentials at a low price point. These practices are reinforced by their institutional origins and identities as community colleges and RCIs as well as through strong relationships with technical colleges and K–12 systems.

The dual mission approach to open admissions aims to ensure student success by offering diverse credential pathways for students who lack college preparedness, often owing to disadvantaged backgrounds and poor K–12 experiences. Although not all students are eligible for all programs, the breadth of programs—especially in mission two—provides opportunities to learners regardless of their prior educational attainment and academic readiness. DMIs surveyed by ACE reported that they had made significant investments in support mechanisms to ensure success and credential completion for access students. Describing the sentiment that justifies these investments, one DMI leader said that his institution's position is that "*we* have to change, not *them*." The leader of another DMI argued that the dual mission model challenges the concept of "college material" by offering pathways for and committing to the success of any kind of learner. DMIs also serve large numbers of nontraditional students, operating as a "place for first, second, third, and fourth chances," according to another DMI president.

Maintaining a low price point is also central to the dual mission model, and every DMI president interviewed by ACE stressed affordability as intrinsic to their institutional identity. However, some DMIs reported that simultaneously offering bachelor's degree programs and career-oriented pathways required tuition to be kept higher than that of traditional community colleges but lower than nearby RCIs. DMI presidents reported that the number and variety of credential offerings available from DMIs allows them to serve a more diverse student body—including traditional 18- to 24-year-olds, high school students, and adults—at higher scale and with greater intentionality than many other institutions. The ability for learners to target specific skills and credentials relevant to in-demand careers while keeping options open for pursuing further education within the same institution is especially attractive for adult learners.

DMIs also facilitate postsecondary accessibility through robust partnerships with technical colleges and K–12 systems. Technical colleges often serve as feeders into DMIs, enabling seamless transfer of credit that stacks up to associate and bachelor's degree pathways. In some instances, DMIs work with technical colleges to communicate the complementary roles they play to policymakers and reduce unfavorable comparisons that lead to unproductive competition. Close collaboration with K–12 schools, especially at the high school level, is also common. These collaborations enable advancement toward shared goals around college readiness, especially in quantitative literacy and reading capabilities. Concurrent enrollment of high school students is common across DMIs. At one DMI surveyed by ACE, one-third of students were enrolled concurrently in high school and college courses. Another DMI president described how "some [learners] are graduating high school and college in the same month with an associate degree."

Drivers of the Dual Mission Model

The growth of the dual mission model has been driven by different factors across different institutions, but the dual mission college and university leaders interviewed by ACE reported several common drivers. Interviewees were unanimous in describing the main motivations for their institutions' transitions to a dual mission model. Each shared that unmet local and regional needs presented opportunities to evolve their institution's purpose in a way that made it more valuable to learners, employers, and community stakeholders and thereby created a strong base for its financial sustainability and growth. A strong regional focus—rather than broader national scope—creates strategic advantages. DMIs develop close-knit relationships with local businesses, particularly those whose workforce needs might not be fully met by larger flagship institutions; these companies become their local champions and lend expertise and guidance, provide employment opportunities for learners, and offer in-kind and sometimes direct financial support.

Institutional competition is another driver of dual mission transitions. Several DMI leaders stated that the need to differentiate themselves from more well-resourced institutions, including public flagship universities and larger, research-oriented regional comprehensive and state universities, made it necessary to develop an innovative value proposition for learners. Two DMI presidents described how they have had to rethink recruitment strategies in light of intensifying competition for enrollments, including recent shifts toward test-optional policies at larger institutions that make them more attractive to students. DMIs lack the resources to offer deep tuition discounts and have low brand recognition; however, they are able to succeed in reaching different student populations, providing learners with a distinctive experience, and offering credentials aligned to economic opportunities. Although larger mission one institutions are the first choice for many traditional 18- to 24-year-old students, they are not always financially accessible, may not be flexible enough for adult learners, and may exclude a wide swath of learners deemed ineligible for college. By carving out a niche that serves learners with different needs—especially by providing labor market–aligned credentials and learning experiences—DMIs are able to avoid the deflationary enrollment dynamics experienced by many other colleges and universities.

ALBANY STATE UNIVERSITY: HOW CONSOLIDATION CAN DRIVE DUAL MISSION TRANSFORMATION

In some cases, pressures that push institutional and systemic consolidation—such as declining enrollments and decreasing state investment—may serve as a driver for the dual mission model. One such example is, Albany State University (ASU), a regional comprehensive institution in Georgia that adopted the dual mission model when it merged with Darton State College—a CCB college—in 2015. Prior to the merger, Darton State offered 50 transfer pathways, more than 40 career programs and certificates, and one bachelor's degree in nursing (Darton State College 2016)—a strong foundation in mission two. Darton State's enrollment had declined by nearly 25 percent over seven years (Gosa 2016). Its merger with ASU alleviated financial pressures, created a stronger resource to support program development, and provided numerous subbaccalaureate pathways to complement ASU's baccalaureate programs. "Absorbing Darton State College added capacity to the new ASU because ASU was doing none of the career-readiness, the nondegree credentials. [ASU] did not do associate degrees at all, so that added what ASU brought to the table," said Marion Ross Fedrick, former president of ASU. The addition of Darton's programs and new student support mechanisms have allowed ASU to reach a large number of students who were not college ready: "Those students who are not completely ready—we put extracurricular support around those students . . . . Our dual mission is broader if you add in the access students—the students who are not fully capable of being in bachelor's degrees [in terms of] testing and grades, but they are able to be in college." The addition of associate-level and career-oriented programs has also supported ASU's financial sustainability; Fedrick noted that these programs are growing faster in enrollment than any other ASU degree programs.

DUAL MISSION TRANSFORMATION PATHWAYS

There are at least four pathways for how CCB colleges and RCIs can evolve into dual mission institutions, and the institutions interviewed by ACE each represented one of these four possibilities (see table 3). Based on these patterns of institutional transformation, it is likely that other institutions around the country have shifted or are in the midst of shifting toward the dual mission model.

TABLE 3. DUAL MISSION PATHWAYS AND INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

	Pathway	Example
1	CCB college scales up baccalaureate offerings	Colorado Mountain College Diné College
2	CCB college becomes an RCI and scales up baccalaureate and noncredit workforce offerings	Utah Technical University Utah Valley University Weber State University
3	RCI scales up associate and noncredit workforce development offerings	Dickinson State University
4	RCI merges with community college or CCB college	Albany State University

Challenges for the Dual Mission Model

To build upon the success of existing dual mission institutions, identify and support other DMIs, and encourage the wider adoption of the model, it is first necessary to address challenges in the higher education sector and the policy landscape as well as at the institutional level. The difficulties facing DMIs at the sectoral and policy levels are related. Most notably, the lack of a validated, research-based characterization of the model makes it more difficult for DMIs to advocate for themselves to policymakers who lack awareness of the model's potential and of the way that federal and state policy creates obstacles for institutions who embrace it. With increased policymaker understanding, acceptance, and advocacy for change that champions the dual mission model, the colleges and universities embracing it will be better positioned to address their own institutional challenges, advocate for themselves collectively and individually, and support other institutions seeking to make a dual mission transformation.

Higher Education Sector Challenges

Despite the successes dual mission institutions are achieving in their own communities, understanding and acceptance of the model is limited. For the DMIs to reach their full potential, the dual mission model must achieve greater recognition and legitimacy within the higher education sector. There is an overall lack of awareness of the model because it is novel and relatively few institutions publicly identify as DMIs, even as many colleges and universities nationwide likely incorporate key elements of the model.

At the sectoral level, the most critical challenge is the lack of a standardized definition for DMIs, which hinders targeted research into their impact and limits recognition among policymakers. This challenge stems from the inability of existing taxonomies to capture dual mission activity. Although valuable for describing the prevailing institutional types across the higher education landscape—with consideration for factors such as the levels and types of degrees offered, proportion of graduates of different degrees, disciplinary focus, and level of research intensity—existing classification frameworks are not designed to reflect the purpose and unique mix of activity that transpires at dual mission institutions. One DMI president aptly summarized the issue, stating that higher education institutions are described with "old terminology [and] old buckets that don't actually define how our institutions operate."

Importantly, only a subset of CCB colleges and RCIs can be classified as dual mission institutions, even if they offer both traditional and nontraditional programs. The *scale* at which an institution offers credentials in both missions, including bachelor's and associate degrees and noncredit workforce development programs, may be the key determinant of whether they are dual mission institutions, and the qualitative and quantitative metrics to establish the appropriate scale of offerings have yet to be determined. For example, neither a CCB college that offers three baccalaureate programs that produce only a handful of graduates nor an RCI that offers workforce development programs that comprise a negligible amount of its total enrollment could be said to be DMIs. Additionally, the use of credentialing models that allow flexibility, ease of transfer between programs, and stackability may be a key consideration for defining DMIs. For the dual mission model to fulfill its full potential, a strong research base that codifies the model and distinguishes it from traditional categorizations of community colleges and RCIs is necessary. This will help to reveal the prevalence of DMIs and showcase the impact they are achieving, leading to greater acceptance and legitimization.

DINÉ COLLEGE: A DUAL MISSION TRIBAL COLLEGE CHALLENGING HIGHER EDUCATION NORMS

Diné College, a land-grant Tribal College serving the Navajo Nation, demonstrates how the dual mission model can be adapted to suit unique institutional identities and highly specialized local needs. With its main campus in northeastern Arizona and six branches across Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, Diné is committed to preserving and promoting Navajo language, culture, and history while providing educational pathways that are relevant to Navajo communities. In addition to offering multiple bachelor's degrees in liberal arts and more applied fields such as education and business, Diné offers a wide variety of nondegree credentials that are tailored to the local economy of the Navajo Nation through its newly launched School of Transformation.

Diné plays a crucial role in the region's economy and workforce development. "We're not just a tribal college. There is nothing else up in northeastern Arizona," said President Charles M. "Monty" Roessel. "We're the economy drivers; we're the workforce developers here." The array of offerings at Diné aims to meet local needs and provide livelihoods so learners can remain on the Navajo Nation and contribute to the long-term health of the community. Roessel says that a key part of this effort is challenging the perception of Tribal Colleges and Universities—the attitude, as expressed by a DMI president, that "you're not a real college yet"—by providing such high value to learners that "they don't feel like they're going to a second-rate institution." Diné is especially focused on reaching the approximately 30,000 people within the Navajo Nation who have some college but no degree and who want an option to enrich themselves—as well as the Navajo culture—without moving away. "That's the reason [we are a] dual mission institution," said Roessel. "We asked a different question. How do we meet the needs of our community? Not, how do we—you know—sit at the table of the big boys?"

Policy Challenges

The federal and state policy frameworks that govern institutions generally assume that a given institution of higher education operates as mission one or mission two. This binary view creates several distinct policy challenges for dual mission institutions.

Accreditation practices are different for universities and community colleges, and there are different sets of standards around mission and outcomes, faculty qualifications, curriculum and assessment, resources and infrastructure, and governance. For example, student service requirements differ significantly between career and technical education versus traditional baccalaureate programs. DMI leaders report that their activities and investments in the mission that is not deemed by the accreditor to be their primary mission—according to their institutional type (e.g., an RCI offering extensive workforce programs)—do not benefit their accreditation and may even be negatively viewed. DMIs also grapple with limitations imposed by traditional accreditation models when seeking to implement competency-based learning, in which seat time isn't the best measure of success.

Outcomes tracking mechanisms are also poorly suited to dual mission institutions. Attainment of nondegree credentials, which are an instrumental part of DMI offerings, is not tracked by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Tracking mechanisms also assume that a learner is on either an associate or bachelor's degree track, but this results in an incomplete picture of the diverse ways that students succeed at DMIs. Further, traditional eight-year graduation tracking does not accommodate scenarios that are common among dual mission learners, such as moving between degree and program pathways; leaving a degree program after obtaining a stackable credential that provides them with a job; beginning in an associate degree program but graduating with a bachelor's degree; or transferring to a larger institution without having completed an associate degree. One DMI president noted that outcomes tracking treats transfer as a failure because "80 percent of our students work while going to school . . . and then when these students transfer from us, we're punished for that." Another DMI president described how traditional tracking methods fail to reflect the diverse ways that students succeed at DMIs, sharing that "the vast majority of students in our welding program will never graduate under [the six-year] standard, and so they're considered failures . . . we have to overcome the . . . punishment of off-ramps of success that are not bachelor's degrees and sometimes not even associate degrees."

Financial aid accessibility also presents several hurdles for DMIs and the learners they serve. Title IV aid is only available to associate and bachelor's degree-seeking students and is inaccessible to those pursuing nondegree workforce training (who are often the access students with the fewest resources). Students also face limitations on the aid they can receive for concurrent enrollment in different programs, limiting their ability to take full advantage of the flexibility and creative pathways offered by DMIs. Learners who already hold a bachelor's degree and are returning to obtain a skills-focused credential are generally unable to access Title IV aid. Additionally, DMIs often operate on flexible, year-round academic calendars, but Pell Grants are typically awarded for the fall and spring semesters of a standard academic calendar.

Federal resources are sometimes difficult to access for DMIs. Because the enrollment mix of DMIs is neither that of a traditional RCI or community college, some federal grants and resources are inaccessible. The president of one DMI—at which less than 50 percent of students earn associate degrees due to the higher proportion of students seeking bachelor's degrees and nondegree certifications—explained that "we are not eligible for federal funding that would normally go to a community college, yet we are that." Limited funds for developing research capacity also present an obstacle to DMIs that are working to scale up applied research that aims to stimulate economic development, strengthen local industry, and create a more robust job market for graduates. One DMI president described struggles in reaching the $50 million research expenditure threshold required to access a wider range of funding opportunities; this forces the institution to accept subaward roles from larger institutions for research that is less relevant to local needs.

State-level funding is also much lower for DMIs. As CCB colleges and RCIs, they occupy a place of lower prestige than research universities and state flagships. Funding schemes and legislative support typically favor these larger universities. Additionally, the career preparation and workforce development credentials that DMIs offer—although vitally important to learners and local economies—are not valued as highly as bachelor's degrees. One DMI president noted that associate degrees are often seen merely as stepping stones to a bachelor's degree rather than valuable credentials in their own right, which reflects the assumption that postsecondary pathways should be linear and terminate in a bachelor's degree. State resources allocated to DMIs are also lower than for traditional RCIs and research institutions. One DMI president described a last-minute reallocation of state resources for the institution's workforce development programs toward research capacity building at the state flagship university.

State-level categorizations of institutions may also limit adoption and success of the dual mission model. In some states, policy dictates defined roles for community colleges and traditional universities in ways that prevent blending of their missions. In other states, a lack of policy clarifying the roles of community colleges and technical

colleges may promote unproductive competition that leads to duplication of offerings and inefficient use of resources. To maximize system-wide efficiency and better serve learners, intentional collaboration and a defined division of program offerings would be beneficial. A careful assessment of existing programs and resources should be the first step to determine if such an overlap currently exists.

UTAH AS AN EXAMPLE OF POLICY SUCCESS

The state of Utah stands as a national leader in advancing the dual mission model and demonstrates the power of supportive state policies. The state's dual mission journey began in 1991 with Weber State University's (WSU) designation as the nation's first institution to identify as dual mission. Utah Valley University (UVU) and Utah Technical University (UTU) followed in 2008 and 2013, respectively. All three universities evolved from community colleges into RCIs by expanding their baccalaureate offerings and while optimizing to meet local workforce needs.

Legislative support has proven instrumental for Utah's DMIs. Astrid S. Tuminez, president of UVU, characterizes the legislature as a "gigantic partner" who sees their relevance and recognizes that "any dollar they invest in the dual mission institution [is an] investment in the workers, the families, and the voters of Utah." Brad L. Mortensen, president of WSU, noted that a key success factor in garnering state support has been identifying a legislative champion in F. Ann Millner, Utah State Senator and a former president of WSU. He said he believes that part of what has made the dual mission model attractive from a "governmental standpoint [are] the efficiencies to having this all under one institution, which would not be the case if we were separate community colleges and four-year universities." Utah's DMIs operate below the Utah System of Higher Education's average tax expenditures per student, owing to their ability to coordinate curriculum and share support services and infrastructure without direct scaling of costs to enrollment.

A key part of the legislature's support is the autonomy it grants to DMIs, including their ability to fast-track program approvals by each institution's trustees rather than by the Utah System of Higher Education. This policy change has proven instrumental, as by Courtney R. White, interim president of WSU, noted: "I can't think perhaps of a larger policy change in the last 10 years that has enabled our academic program growth more than that. It's been absolutely instrumental that our local board of trustees has that authority . . . [we would] probably not have one engineering degree, let alone a half dozen." President Tuminez shared that industry partners are pleased by the agility and responsiveness of Utah's DMIs: "They love how quickly we can pivot. We don't have two years of committee conversations. If you could make a decision quickly or you could deliver something in partnership with an industry player, we do it." A legislative mandate clearly defining the roles of DMIs and technical colleges, prohibiting some forms of direct competition, has also encouraged collaboration and smoother pathways between them. Utah's success highlights how states can actively support and shape the dual mission model, fostering institutions that are high-performing, flexible, and responsive to employer and learner needs.

Institutional Challenges

Transitioning to the dual mission model requires significant culture change within higher education institutions. Deeply held attitudes among faculty, such as the perception that vocational training is less valuable than traditional academic pathways, may present obstacles—at least initially—to the institution-wide embrace of a dual mission identity and to the growth of mission two programs. For example, a president of one DMI that offers commercial driver's license (CDL) certifications shared that some faculty members initially felt that "truck driving is beneath us." Even within supportive environments, faculty at DMIs may still internalize perceptions about the lower prestige of working with access students versus more academically prepared cohorts, which may influence their job satisfaction and motivation. Faculty members may also be uncomfortable teaching nontraditional classes in nondegree tracks, as mission two programs require a more practical curricular focus that may require faculty members to adopt pedagogies with which they are unfamiliar.

Addressing student readiness gaps—a crucial aspect of the dual mission mandate—drives up costs and poses operational challenges. Access students are likelier to be at risk and have significant gaps in their academic foundation due to disadvantaged K–12 and socioeconomic backgrounds. Struggles with basic writing, math, and study skills can make it difficult for them to keep pace with traditional coursework, and faculty members with research-oriented credentials may lack the pedagogical training or experience to effectively serve students who need more intensive support and remediation. The financial constraints that access students face can also be a major hurdle, as many lack the funds to cover shortfalls in financial aid or pursue nondegree programs for which Title IV aid is not available. Alleviating this difficulty requires DMIs to identify and connect students with other sources of financial assistance, which is not always possible.

The high costs of operating in mission one and mission two present another institutional challenge. Offering the wide range of programming necessary to consistently serve diverse students is inherent to the dual mission model, but this requires constant growth, adaptation of pathways, greater flexibility, and a broader array of resources. This type of programming, especially in career-track fields such as CDL, welding, and diesel technology, can incur significant expenses. Startup costs can easily reach into the millions due to equipment purchases, infrastructure upgrades, and salaries for practitioner faculty members who are hired based on industry experience, all of which results in higher instructional costs than in traditional academic fields. Consequently, launching new mission two programs may require shutting down other programs with low enrollments, less growth potential, and lack of a connection to local market needs.

Resource tradeoffs are also necessary to serve different types of students that generally do not matriculate at a single institution. "The biggest challenge we run into internally is that we get pulled in different directions," according to one DMI president. "Bachelor's students get services that may not be as robust as you see at another institution, but CTE students are probably getting a lot more than what you'd see in a traditional model . . . . we're still trying to offer a balance of teacher education certifications and nursing programs, and we have to think about how to do that in a way that is consistent and sustainable."

Action Areas

Addressing the aforementioned challenges requires a coordinated approach among dual mission institutions. Defining and qualifying the dual mission model is the critical first step to enable outreach to policy stakeholders and build stronger institutional practice within DMIs.

Research and Taxonomy Development

Because existing postsecondary classifications are unable to describe the breadth and nuance of DMIs, it is necessary to formalize a definition of the model that enables identification and systematic study of DMIs and their impact. A focused research agenda will impart insights that are essential for DMIs, policymakers, and higher education stakeholders by illuminating the distinctive contributions of DMIs to learner success, supplying evidence of how they align with community needs around economic growth and workforce demands, and providing policymakers with the data and understanding they need to make informed decisions for supporting and enhancing the dual mission model.

KEY RESEARCH ACTIONS

1. **Develop a research-based definition:** Because basic criteria for the dual mission model is that an institution offers three different credential types at scale, the primary basis for a validated definition should be based upon measurement of the extent to which they facilitate attainment of each credential

type. Cut points demonstrating learner attainment across credential types should represent a significant shift in operations and institutional culture. A possible threshold might involve demonstrated graduation rates of at least 8 percent for bachelor's degrees, 8 percent for associate degrees, and 8 percent for nondegree workforce programs. Obtaining this data would require going beyond what is currently reported to IPEDS, as federal data sources do not currently capture nondegree programs.

2. **Identify DMIs:** Once a clearer definition is established, the next step is to identify which institutions within the U.S. fit the DMI model profile. This will determine how widespread the model currently is and enable further data collection and analysis.

3. **Empirically characterize DMIs:** While it is likely that DMIs exist in significant numbers, understanding of their commonalities and their specific impacts is limited. Research is necessary for qualifying specific aspects of their intrinsic characteristics, especially in terms of credentialing practices, industry partnerships, and accessibility. Other research questions may include:

    - **Shared characteristics:** What traits do DMIs have in common regarding institutional demographics, program offerings, and student populations?
    - **Student outcomes:** How do DMI student outcomes compare to bachelor's degree graduates from traditional bachelor's degree institutions?
    - **Success patterns:** What learner success patterns exist at DMIs that might not be captured by metrics assuming linear bachelor's degree paths?
    - **Promising practices:** What successful DMI practices ensure students are supported along pathways from subbaccalaureate credentials to bachelor's degrees?
    - **Economic impact:** How do local and regional economic trends and workforce needs shape DMIs, model sustainability, and funding?

Policy Outreach

A proactive, strategic approach to policymaker outreach is crucial to addressing policy-related challenges for DMIs that limit their impact, such as a lack of funding, misaligned accreditation and outcomes tracking, financial aid regulations, and inadequate federal and state resources and guidance. Nourishing supportive environments at the state level is the most immediate way to create favorable outcomes for DMIs, distinguish them from other institutional types, and help to set the stage for potential shifts in accreditation and federal policy.

KEY POLICY OUTREACH ACTIONS

1. **State-level policymaker outreach:** Outreach at the state and local level is an ideal starting point, because as CCB colleges and RCIs, DMIs are uniquely dependent on state funding. Moreover, the experience of existing DMIs demonstrates that state and local leaders are receptive to the intrinsically local and regional value proposition of DMIs, and this suggests that they may be more receptive and agile than federal policymakers in facilitating dual mission activity. Potential outreach activities may include:

    - **Targeted testimony and issue briefs:** DMIs can provide testimony before state legislatures and higher education committees, highlighting their impact and showcasing success stories. Issue briefs tailored to state-specific concerns may be a valuable tool for reaching legislators
    - **Identification of legislative champions:** Securing buy-in from key legislators may help to give DMIs a voice in the policymaking process
    - **Demonstrating workforce alignment:** Partnering with employers to showcase how DMIs train a skilled workforce that addresses regional needs can strengthen the case for policy support

- **Advocacy coalitions:** Fostering coalitions of DMIs within and across states enables institutions to pool resources, develop shared messaging, and strategize for greater influence. Higher education advocacy organizations can help facilitate these collaborations

2. **Differentiated roles for stronger systems:** Greater intentionality is needed to clarify the distinct roles of technical colleges, community colleges, and DMIs. Ensuring these institutions cooperate rather than compete will foster a stronger higher education landscape and clarify the dual mission value proposition.

    - **Codifying dual mission institutions:** The example of Utah demonstrates the power in state-level endorsement of DMIs as a distinct institutional type, unlocking resources and providing a basis for delineating between other colleges and universities
    - **Clarifying missions:** Working with state policymakers to define distinct roles and missions for technical colleges, community colleges, and DMIs will help to ensure each type of institution is positioned to maximize its contribution
    - **Strengthening state-level articulation agreements:** Advocating for and reinforcing pathways for articulation agreements can promote seamless pathways for students moving within the higher education landscape
    - **Incentivizing DMI collaboration:** Supporting policy mechanisms that encourage curricular co-development and resource sharing across DMIs may enhance performance and cost-effectiveness

3. **Engaging accreditors:** Educating and working proactively with accrediting bodies can ensure better alignment of their incentives with the dual mission model. Accreditation standards designed with the DMI model in mind will enable these institutions to highlight their strengths without being disadvantaged.

    - **Accreditation dialogues:** Conversations with accrediting bodies will allow sharing of insights that helps them to understand the distinctiveness of the dual mission model and the needs of DMIs, potentially leading to consideration of amending accreditation standards
    - **Competency-based education advocacy:** As leaders in competency-based learning, DMIs can make a strong case for adjusting standards away from seat time
    - **Showcase successes:** Actively promoting successful examples of DMI programs and student outcomes to accreditors can shift perceptions and create opportunities for innovation

4. **Advocate for long-term financial aid reform:** Unlocking greater flexibility in Title IV funding is necessary to support the specific needs and enrollment patterns at dual mission institutions.

    - **Term-based aid disbursement:** Advocating for shifting financial aid disbursement from the traditional academic year model to a term-by-term structure would accommodate the year-round enrollment patterns of dual mission students and ease their financial burdens
    - **Certificate student eligibility:** Removing the degree-seeking requirement for financial aid would open up eligibility to students enrolled in certificate programs
    - **Support for add-on credentials:** Allowing bachelor's degree holders to receive full financial aid support for pursuing essential add-on credentials within their fields would promote professional development and workforce advancement

Develop and Support Dual Mission Communities

The formalization of a supportive coalition of DMIs will help to amplify their profile and impact within their states and nationwide. Building an effective coalition entails bringing together DMIs to facilitate ongoing dialogue, identify shared areas of focus, and collaboratively develop solutions to address those challenges at the institutional level. These activities may ultimately help to raise awareness of DMIs and the success they are

achieving and increase adoption of the dual mission model. National higher education organizations, including ACE, the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC), the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), can play an important role as conveners and facilitators of these efforts. They can work with DMIs to establish communities of practice, facilitate collaborations, and provide resources to support solutions, awareness, and impact.

KEY COMMUNITY BUILDING FOCUS AREAS

1. **Supporting institutional solutions:** As the DMI coalition grows, it can become a resource for mutual support around institutional transformation.
    - **Sharing best practices:** Facilitating the exchange of effective practices in academic innovation that support the dual mission model
    - **Cultivating culture change:** Developing toolkits, training programs, and strategies to cultivate a learner-focused mindset that embraces mission two across both administrative and academic departments
    - **Engaging internal partners:** Promoting collaboration between academic affairs and faculty to streamline dual mission implementation (especially related to mission two)
    - **Incentivizing faculty:** Exploring ways to embed student success metrics across all missions into post-tenure review processes, encouraging faculty buy-in; examining innovative approaches such as annual rather than nine-month contracts to facilitate greater focus on career-track instruction
2. **Publicize DMI activity:** A coalition approach can help DMIs share success stories in a cohesive way and engage higher education and policy stakeholders with effective storytelling that generates awareness, interest, and action.
    - **Coordinated communication:** Designing comprehensive messaging that highlights the distinct value DMIs deliver to communities, employers, and policymakers
    - **National awareness:** Raising awareness of the dual mission model through strategic communications and aligned national messaging
    - **State-specific communication strategies:** Equipping individual DMIs with tailored strategies that resonate best within their local political and economic landscapes; this communication should emphasize themes that provide the best traction with decision-makers (e.g., career and workforce development, access, social mobility, or other contextually relevant language)
3. **Accelerate the shift toward dual mission model:** The dual mission community is well equipped to share its experience with system and institutional leaders and policymakers who can support dual mission transitions, including:
    - **Community college transformations:** Assisting community colleges in scaling up workforce development programs and aligning with the dual mission model
    - **University transformations:** Supporting traditional universities in developing workforce-focused offerings, aligning more closely with DMI principles
    - **Leverage system mergers:** Guiding institutions and higher education systems undergoing mergers to incorporate dual mission pathways and goals
    - **Technical college collaborations:** Across all pathways, fostering deeper collaboration between technical colleges and DMIs to maximize resource-sharing and optimize the reach of nontraditional programming

Conclusion: Setting an Agenda for Collective Action and Policy Transformation

The emergence of the dual mission model is part of a broader shift in the higher education landscape toward greater responsiveness to evolving social and economic demands. Dual mission institutions are challenging traditional notions of what higher education can and should be while helping to define a new era of innovation and adaptability in postsecondary education. The HEA and federal policy frameworks that have shaped our contemporary postsecondary landscape—and continue to serve colleges and universities and vast numbers of learners—have been refined numerous times in the past several decades, and continuing policy adaptation is important to ensure that higher education remains relevant and impactful.

The emerging dual mission model can serve as a catalyst for developing a new paradigm for higher education policy at both the federal and state levels that moves beyond the limitations of existing policy frameworks. For the dual mission model to reach its full potential, policy must evolve past the implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—binary view of institutions that treats them as serving the goals of either producing bachelor's degrees or developing the workforce. It is equally important that policy frameworks begin to adapt to increasingly nonlinear and changing patterns of credential attainment and move beyond the assumption that bachelor's degree attainment is the primary goal of higher education.

ACE and other higher education stakeholders can play an important role in supporting the dual mission community in its journey toward greater recognition and sustainable growth. Further defining and qualifying the dual mission model is the critical first step that will enable effective outreach to policy stakeholders and the strengthening of institutional practice within DMIs. A clear, evidence-based characterization of the dual mission model will help to reveal the distinctive contributions DMIs make toward learner success and the communities they serve, building a compelling case for their approach.

Greater evidence of impact will equip the dual mission community with the data to communicate the effectiveness of DMIs to policymakers and encourage informed policy adaptations. By supporting policies that recognize the unique needs and goals of DMIs, policymakers can help to create a more favorable environment for innovation, experimentation, and responsiveness to local needs, and this will ultimately lead to a more effective and impactful higher education system that is well suited to the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century.

The long-term success of the dual mission approach depends on the collective efforts of institutions in the dual mission community and continued collaboration with each other and with stakeholders such as ACE. As the community works to educate and engage policymakers, advocate for supportive policies, and demonstrate the effectiveness of its approach, its members can continue to collectively promote the wider adoption of the model, building on the success they have achieved even in the absence of policy incentives. With a focused agenda that clearly communicates their value, dual mission institutions can not only unlock the full potential of their unique approach to drive meaningful change but also contribute to the development of a higher education system that is better prepared to meet the evolving needs of learners, communities, and the workforce in the decades to come.

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