

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

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.

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.

Learn more at www.acenet.edu/dual-mission-institutions