

Counties at Work

Counties Support Post-Secondary
Education and Workforce
Opportunities for Residents

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About NACo:

The National Association of Counties (NACo) **strengthens America's counties**, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo unites county officials to:

- **Advocate county priorities** in federal policymaking;
- **Promote exemplary county policies** and practices;
- **Nurture leadership skills** and expand knowledge networks;
- **Optimize county and taxpayer resources** and cost savings; and
- **Enrich the public's understanding** of county government.

The National Association of Counties Research Foundation (NACoRF) is a non-profit organization recognized by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service as a 501c3 public charity providing education, technical assistance and research to counties. NACoRF's mission is to ascertain, develop and distribute knowledge about county governments and training of public officials, prospective public officials and other interested parties.

About NACo's Landscape Analysis:

In partnership with the [ECMC Foundation](#), the National Association of Counties (NACo) conducted a national landscape analysis on counties' role and decision-making authority in post-secondary education. This analysis identified impactful county efforts including directly allocating local funds, pursuing regional and intergovernmental partnerships to leverage federal resources and coordinating post-secondary education systems with county systems, such as health and human services, as well as with local private industry. Such efforts maximize educational and employment opportunities and increase access for residents. Recently, counties have led and supported their post-secondary education institutions in mitigating local challenges related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Through an electronic survey and group and individual interviews, NACo examined how county leaders:

1. Make decisions affecting the post-secondary education sector;
2. Allocate public funding impacting higher education institutions;
3. Create partnerships with the post-secondary education sector to strengthen its connection with other systems; and
4. Work to slow the spread of COVID-19 in post-secondary education settings.

Methodology:

NACo's methodology for this landscape analysis included the following components:

- An electronic survey sent to approximately 40,000 county leaders which collected quantitative data on counties' decision-making authority affecting post-secondary education systems;
- Ten (10) one-on-one interviews with county leaders exploring local strategies for expanding career and educational opportunities for residents and how to foster strong partnerships with post-secondary education institutions; and
- A virtual focus group of national, state and county leaders to gather information on key considerations for counties in using best practice approaches and resources for establishing these partnerships and career pathways initiatives.

Key Considerations for County Leaders Seeking to Partner with Post-Secondary Education Institutions

- Work with county board and executive officials in providing funding for post-secondary education institutions within your county, especially for technology applications and technical solutions supporting distance learning for students during COVID-19 and beyond and in areas with wide digital divides.
- Facilitate and maintain regular communication among higher education institution and public sector leaders to identify students' needs and find ways to address educational and service access barriers.
- Promote cross-sector collaboration by sharing data and staff resources, providing thought leadership, identifying approaches to help fill systemic gaps and offering solutions to local challenges through government and community-based programs.
- Actively participate in statewide and regional efforts to expand, align and scale career readiness efforts.
- Bring private sector employers to the table to explore the needs of local industries and identify where to expand post-secondary education and job skills training programs that work to improve skillsets and address shortages in high-demand positions.
- Include higher education leaders in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) state and local planning efforts to increase career pathways opportunities for residents.
- Enhance coordination among county Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) and human services agencies to help meet the basic needs of low-income residents and address underlying issues and community challenges that negatively affect their educational attainment and employment outcomes.

Introduction

The county role in post-secondary education systems and adult education programs is not universal nor well-defined. Counties either have direct authority or work in coordination with a variety of sectors and systems that are intimately connected to post-secondary education institutions. When working in collaboration with higher education as key partners, county-based systems can build a solid foundation for residents in achieving economic mobility and lifelong success.

Despite the tremendous promise of post-secondary education systems, the full impact remains unrealized. According to Georgetown Public Policy Institute, about two-thirds of high-quality jobs require education beyond high school yet only 46 percent of working age adults possess that minimum standard.¹ Additionally, rapid changes in the economy present a greater need for workers to have the acquired skills and qualifications necessary to meet the demands of today's workforce. Increasing county leaders' understanding of their role and decision-making authority in post-secondary education can help address systemic barriers in residents in achieving educational attainment and gainful employment and the workforce needs of local industries. Expanding residents' access

to post-secondary and adult education supports and workforce readiness programs can improve their long-term outcomes and the local economy.

During the 2016–17 school year, there were over **25.6 million students enrolled in post-secondary education institutions** and **about 6.4 thousand higher education institutions** located in our nation's counties. Of those surveyed, about **eighty-four (84) percent of county leaders have a higher education institution located in their county**, which includes 4-year universities and colleges, 2-year community or junior colleges or career and technical, vocational or trade schools. The vast majority of those institutions **(87 percent) are public junior or community colleges**, which shows the high level of public investment in higher education. The prevalence of public post-secondary education intuitions receiving public dollars or using public land or facilities shows promise for counties in leading activities that expand opportunities for higher education and career success. Counties can play a key role in creating an ecosystem of interconnected services and supports where higher education is involved as an active partner of county-wide career pathways efforts.

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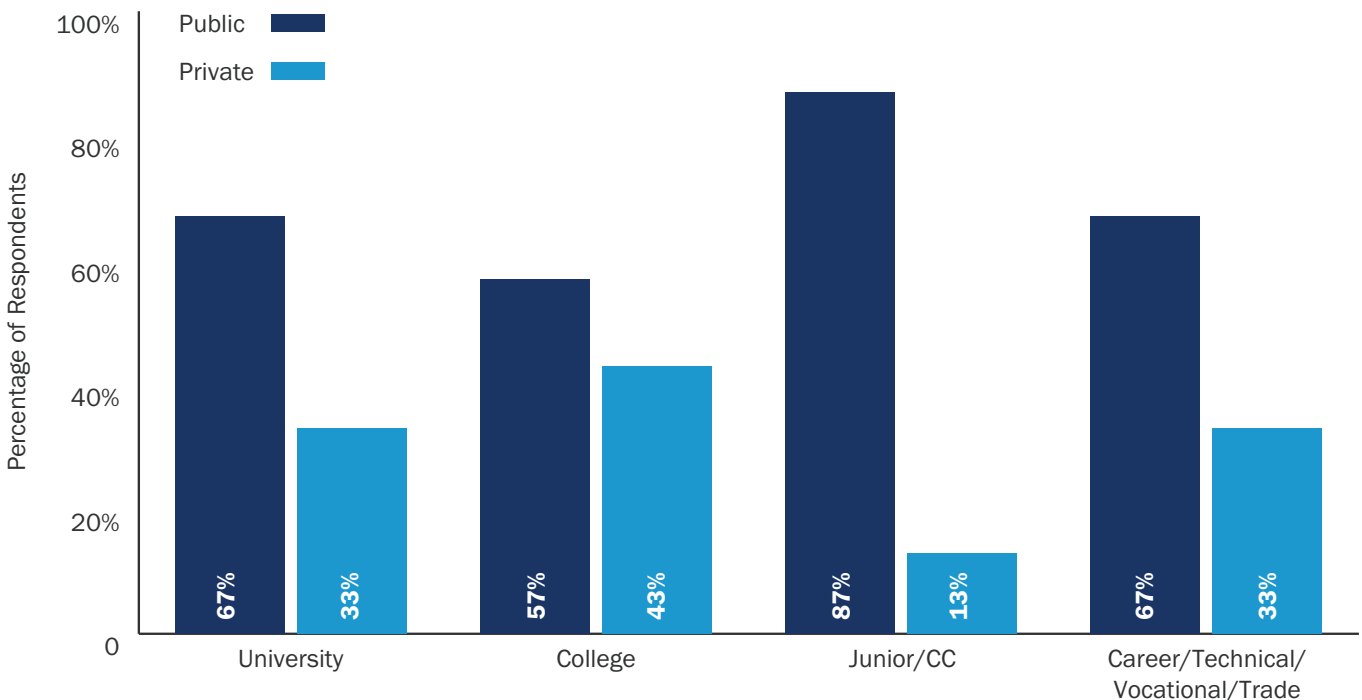
Counties' decision-making authority in the post-secondary education sector varies; however, counties remain critical actors in driving integration and coordination among human services, workforce, and economic programs and systems to strengthen career pathways for residents. When these systems are coordinated with higher education, they can lead to lifelong, positive outcomes for residents. NACo found that counties are using cross-systems collaboration to streamline services and supports for residents. Increased coordination and collaboration among workforce preparedness training, food assistance and child care services can lay the foundation and support long-term employment.

Throughout the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, counties nationwide have employed novel solutions for protecting the health and well-being of residents. County partnerships among public health and higher education have been critical in helping to slow the spread of COVID-19 among students and employees in post-secondary education settings. Key findings in this report will explore best practices for promoting health and safety standards for slowing the spread of COVID-19 such as on-campus social distancing policies and increased sanitation of educational materials

**Over 257,000
county human
services employees
across the country
deliver vital services
to our nation's
most vulnerable
populations.**

Source: [NACo County Explorer](#)

Figure 1: Higher Education Institutions Located In Counties (n=104)



and facilities and improving access to online learning. NACo found that county public health departments' coordination with higher education institutions is critical for successful implementation of public health standards.

In June 2020, NACo surveyed county leaders to explore the county role and authority in the higher education sector and conducted a landscape analysis to explore the topic more deeply. This report highlights best practice approaches for county governments seeking to promote economic stability and career readiness opportunities for residents.

The County Role in Post-Secondary Education

Post-Secondary Education Institution Types

Post-secondary education institutions provide education beyond high school and offer rich learning and academic experiences for students. They also offer skills-based training for adults who are interested in a certain profession or trade. **Four-year universities and colleges** create a traditional learning environment that is rooted in academic culture. Typically, students graduating from a 4-year institution obtain a Bachelor of Science or Liberal arts degree. **Community or junior colleges** typically provide students with a two-year education where they can obtain an associate degree or transfer credits to a 4-year institution to continue their education.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) schools also offer students with an associate degree or short-term certificate of advanced education. CTE programs provide students with academic and technical skills, knowledge and training for gaining the necessary skills to be competitors in the job market and/or transfer credits to a four-year institution.ⁱⁱ These programs prepare students for careers such as paralegal or legal assisting, nursing aid, dental hygiene, business and finance, music, agriculture and arts and design. CTE full course completion typically requires about 60 credit hours of instruction or 4 semesters of education.



Some graduate schools
and 4-year universities
have institutes of
technology that specialize
in engineering, technology,
applied science, and
natural sciences.

Trade schools also offer smaller units of credit hours that are designed to train students for a specific job in a skilled trade career and provide hands-on training to prepare students for immediate work in their chosen fieldⁱⁱⁱ. Trade schools typically offer flexible class schedules to accommodate life obligations, such as family or job responsibilities.^{iv}

Vocational programs are in both secondary and post-secondary education systems to prepare students for emerging occupations that may not require a bachelors or advanced degree^v. Examples of trade or vocational programs and careers include electrical technician, hair or nail technician, operations management, plumbing and landscaping and may require continuing education while in the profession. With vocational programs, students can earn their degree faster and save money on tuition compared to four-year institutions.

Continuing education and workforce development programs (e.g., credential, certificate or licensure, professional development and training, skills-based learning) offer adult learners non-degree, non-credit professional programs designed for enhancing knowledge and skills in a particular area leading to a license or credential.^{vi} Continuing education courses are conducted by private organizations, local professional boards, colleges and universities. Some schools may offer certificate programs, but the focus of continuing education is on non-credit courses for students to develop skills in a specific area of interest.^{vii} These programs can benefit adults who seek to enhance their skills in a particular profession or have the necessary credentials for employment, as required by their profession or licensing board. Employers may give employees flexible work hours during their course time or a period of study or subsidize course fees if the coursework is related to their position.^{viii}

Counties' decision-making authority in post-secondary education systems

Counties' decision-making authority affecting post-secondary education systems and adult education programs (i.e., non-degree, credit-bearing education) is not universal nor well-defined. This authority includes the ability to fund and establish local policies impacting higher education institutions.

Counties are governed by locally elected officials and, in some instances, operate under home rule authority, which allows for more local flexibility and control on structural, functional and fiscal powers. These positions include elected county executives that have oversight of county-based agencies and budgets and county commissioners, council members and supervisors that advance local policies and advise on county services. Local authority may involve the ability to develop and approve budgets, establish tax rates, issue bonds and create public corporations, provide services and perform multitudinous tasks associated with the day-to-day operation of government.^{ix} Most counties, however, operate under the more restrictive "Dillon's Rule," where local authority is expressly granted by the state. Though organizational structures vary, all county, parish and borough governments deliver vital services and support to residents.

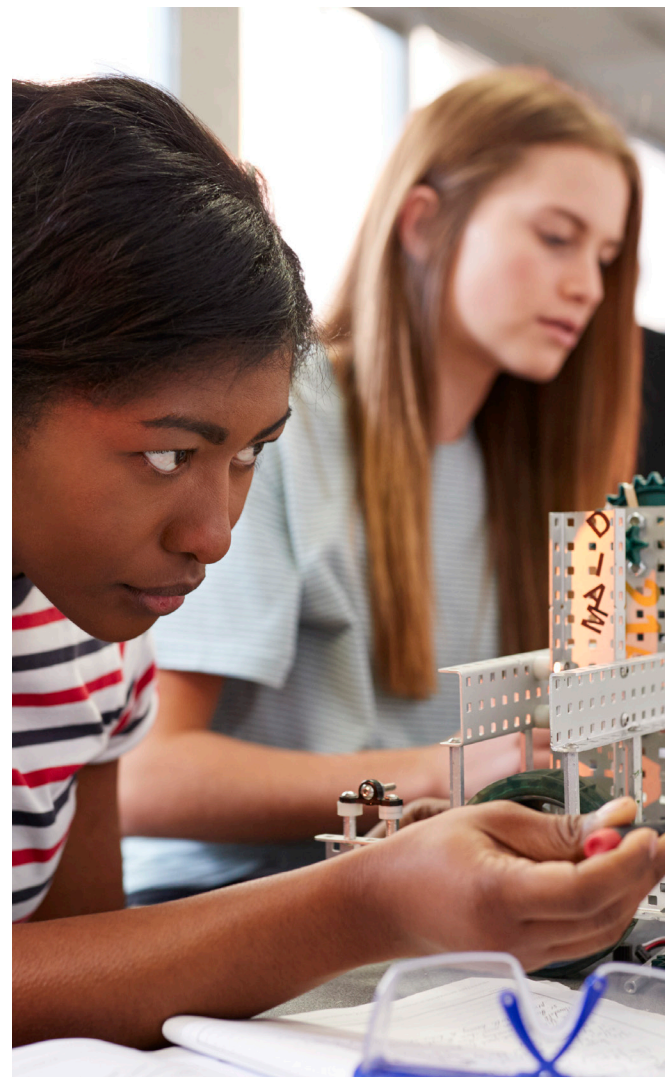
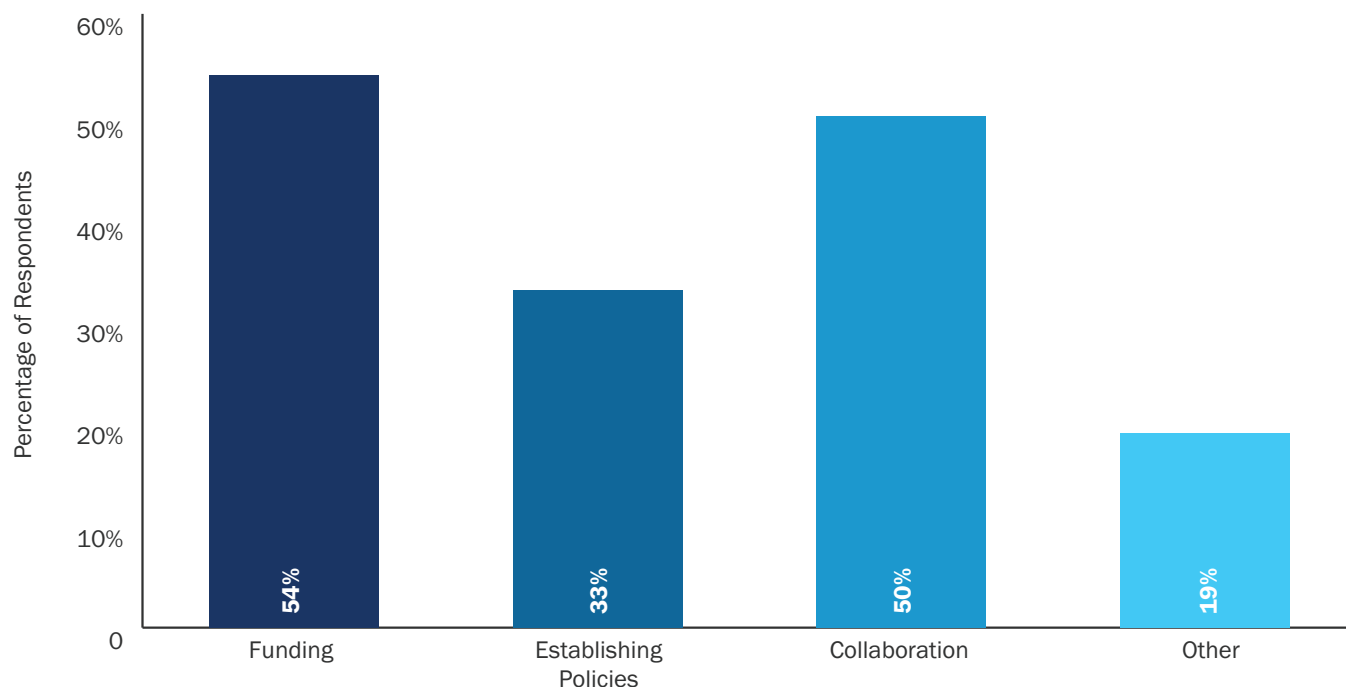


Figure 2: County Role In Decisions Related To Post-Secondary Education (n=48)



Of those surveyed, about **33 percent of county leaders said that their county board makes decisions affecting post-secondary education system policy**. Approximately half of respondents indicated they **make decisions regarding funding (54 percent) or through their collaborative efforts involving post-secondary education institutions (50 percent)**. Examples include providing funding for post-secondary education's facilities, operations and programs and leading and participating in cross-sector collaboration efforts to improve coordination among county-based employment and workforce preparedness services. According to NACo's survey, county leaders serve on and appoint members for community college boards of directors, have contracts with universities to help maintain campus buildings and provide other services, and extend public transportation routes to improve access and connectivity to higher education institutions. County leaders also work with community colleges and technical schools in developing programs and curriculum that prepare students for trade jobs and technical careers, especially for jobs that are in high-demand. Whether a county has significant or minimal authority in making decisions on higher education, county leaders show commitment to improving educational attainment and workforce readiness for residents through local investments alone.

County funding for post-secondary education systems and its programming

While funding for post-secondary education systems may derive from federal, state or local sources, counties invest in higher education. **One quarter of county leaders (24 percent) indicated they fund higher education systems within their county.** This funding demonstrates counties' commitment in supporting the establishment and sustainability of local universities and community colleges regardless of the level of authority. Counties fund and have significant decision-making authority in public land use and own public facilities, especially involving public schools and some higher education buildings. County investments also fund financial aid for students such as student loans, grants, scholarships and paid internships to promote college affordability.

Counties invest more than \$600 billion annually in delivering essential services.* Education is the third largest source of expenditures for counties. In FY2017, county expenditures for education included \$103 billion for

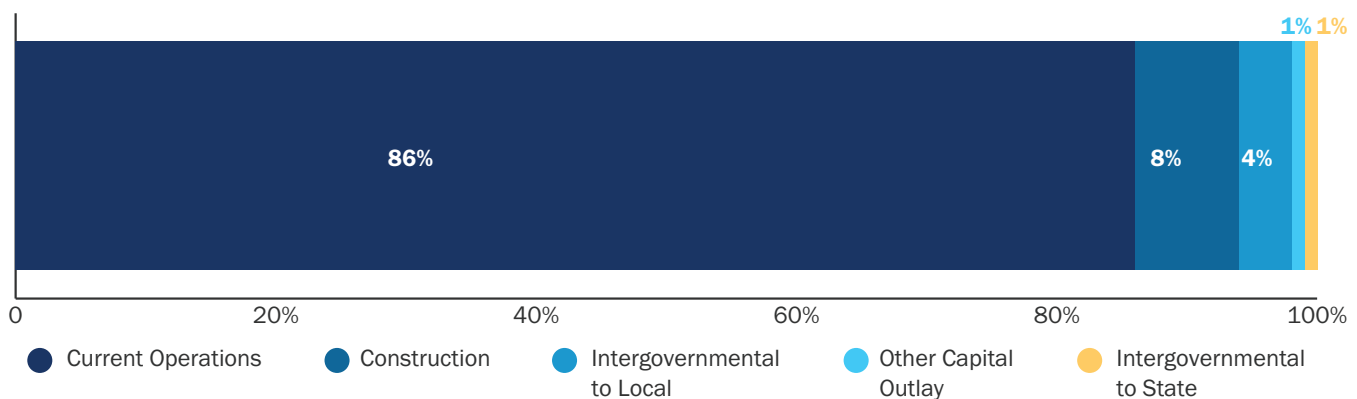
construction and maintenance of public school buildings and support for post-secondary education.^{xi} County expenditures for higher education included \$9 billion, and 86 percent of this spending is for campus operations.¹ This amount also involves direct funding to 2-year junior colleges or community colleges, 4-year universities and graduate schools such as law, medical, engineering and business administration schools and agricultural colleges, land grant institutions and other institutions granting postsecondary education degrees. In response to NACo's survey, **county leaders noted their top investments in higher education include direct funding to colleges and universities (58 percent) and continuing education and workforce development programs (52 percent).**

County expenditures also include campus supplementary services, which are partially or largely funded through fee for service contracts and operated on a commercial basis. Some of the highest expenditures in FY2017 involved direct funding and support for the maintenance of dormitories, cafeterias, athletic facilities and bookstores. Other expenditures include post-secondary educational resources for instruction, research, public service (excluding agricultural extension services), academic support for college students, libraries, other student and administration services and plant maintenance and services regarding student health services. One key strategy for customizing educational offerings to meet local needs, especially in rural counties, is the local college extension office. Extension offices provide non-formal education and learning activities for farmers and

other residents of rural communities to engage them in research, education and jobs in agricultural fields. Through extension offices, land-grant colleges and universities bring vital, practical information to agricultural producers, small business owners, consumers, families and young people. For example, **Maui County, Hawaii** funds faculty and staff positions at its local college's extension office as a part of its partnership to promote agriculture and create local solutions addressing climate issues. The University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources serve the citizens of Maui County by providing science-based research, education and public service and bringing community solutions and filling gaps in agriculture, natural resources, food and nutrition, food safety and community development.^{xii} In Maui County, this work is driven by the college's faculty and staff of its Cooperative Extension, which is located in Kahului and Hoolehua, and the Maui Agricultural Research Center located in Kula.

County extension offices are prevalent in rural communities where there are careers and educational opportunities in agriculture and other industries in close geographic proximity to local residents. Post-secondary education institutions, whether university, community college or vocational or trade school, can offer a wide range of educational programming that prepares students for the skillsets needed for local industry jobs. While this approach presents significant opportunities for county residents, post-secondary education leaders must also understand the rural challenges that create roadblocks for students

Figure 3: County Higher Education Expenditures



¹ U.S. Census Bureau definition of Current Operations: Direct expenditure for compensation of own officers and employees and for supplies, materials, and contractual services except any amounts for capital outlay (i.e., for personal services or other objects used in contract construction or government employee construction of permanent structures and for acquisition of property and equipment). U.S. Census Bureau. (2006) *Government Finance and Classification Manual*. Retrieved from: https://www2.census.gov/govs/pubs/classification/2006_classification_manual.pdf

seeking higher education and training that are often tied to community conditions. Such challenges include rural poverty, limited access to transportation and traditional and non-traditional child care, food insecurity and lack of broadband access.

Research shows that locales designated as rural have higher poverty rates and lower education levels than those labeled urban, suburban or town.^{xiii} While college graduates earn on average 70 percent more than nondegree holders, this may not be the daily experience for residents in economically depressed areas.^{xiv}

Regardless of population density, cross-sector collaboration and continued county investments for higher education can lead to educational opportunities that equip students with skills needed for local industry jobs, generate sustainable employment opportunities, and breakdown systemic and economic barriers that affect student matriculation and graduation rates. Higher education and public sector leaders can also bring private industry and federal partners to the table to help sustain jobs and expand well-compensated employment opportunities for residents experiencing economic challenges within their community.



“According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture, “the hallmarks of the extension program — openness, accessibility, and service — illuminate how cooperative extension brings evidence-based science and modern technologies to farmers, consumers, and families [and are designed to offer resources to address public needs]. By educating farmers on business operations and on modern agricultural science and technologies, extension [offices] contribute to the success of countless farms, ranches, and rural businesses. These services improve the lives of consumers and families through nutrition education, food safety training, and youth leadership development.”

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture
<https://nifa.usda.gov/extension>

Federal investments in Regional and Local Workforce Development

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is a key funding and policy lever that provides federal funding to states and counties for a wide range of workforce development and job training programs for jobseekers and employers. Administered jointly by the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, WIOA empowers state and local governments to connect individuals with in-demand skills training and education, and businesses to skilled jobseekers.^{xv}

WIOA fosters a partnership among federal, state and local government, which supports counties in delivering employment and job preparedness services through workforce development programs and American Jobs Centers (AJCs).^{xvi} State and local WIOA workforce development boards (WDBs) and AJCs are a central component of WIOA. WDBs offer flexibility for localities in

establishing workforce policies and programs unique to their community and local challenges. Local WDBs have oversight of one stop career centers and are responsible for leveraging public funding, coordinating and facilitating multiple strategic partners representing businesses, higher education and human services and workforce agencies, providing strategic direction and tracking accountability. Regionally, WDBs can involve one county or several counties, and based on local need, they generate resources and bring together public and private sectors to increase job readiness and employment opportunities.^{xvii} Additionally, local elected officials are responsible for appointing board members, which must include representatives from local businesses and education, labor and community-based organizations.

AJCs, also known as one stop career centers, are centralized in local communities and provide free assistance to jobseekers by connecting them to a variety of career and employment services and educational and job placement supports.^{xviii} Services may include assistance on interviewing skills, referrals to employment workshops, hiring events and job counselors and access to resource rooms with phones, computers and educational materials to support them in job seeking and preparedness. WIOA funds are leveraged locally to create these person-centric, one stop career centers for residents to access tailored



education and training services and receive streamlined case management services.

Coordination and Collaboration for Improved Workforce Outcomes

County Coordination with Higher Education

According to NACo's survey, about **41 percent of counties have a career readiness and/or educational attainment initiative that includes partnership with higher education.** Many of these initiatives are driven by WIOA state and local efforts and help prepare students for in-demand jobs. **Hennepin County, Minn.** has a research sharing program and opportunities for student internships. **DeKalb County, Ga.** also has a summer jobs program in partnership with local universities and colleges and supports institutions by providing public land and authorizing use.



Regular communication is key for creating strong partnerships across multiple departments and sectors. Workforce development boards, businesses, county departments of health and human services and post-secondary education institutions are coming together to share data on workforce needs, develop training and curriculum and reach high schoolers and the adult workforce with programs and services. **In response to NACo's survey, county leaders told NACo that having access to data across multiple systems is critical** for informing local decisions affecting higher education institutions and improving community outcomes. **Hamilton County, Tenn.** county health department coordinates with the county community college to provide educational opportunities for trade jobs in high demand and careers such as nurses and medical technicians. The county also works with local high schools in promoting its local community colleges at job fairs to enhance college enrollment for residents. In **Dakota County, Minn.** and **Shelby County, Ohio**, local workforce boards and post-secondary education institutions work together to offer training for local careers in great demand and engage disconnected workers in employment. This strategy helps improve the local economy by working to reduce employment barriers and retain jobs for skilled workers who live in the county.

County Coordination with Human Services

County-based human services systems also play a role helping to reduce employment and education barriers for low-income residents. For example, **Allegheny County, Pa.'s** human services department hires, trains and funds navigators for the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) to connect college students to county resources, such as housing or behavioral health services and economic support programs. In **Solano County, Calif.**, recipients of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance program are connected to post-secondary education institutions to enroll them in CTE programs.

The 2014 reauthorization of WIOA encouraged coordination among the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) and other public assistance programs to support educational and employment outcomes for low-income residents.² The goal is to reduce duplication and improve program coordination for efficient service delivery among these critical safety net and employment

programs and systems. Many states leverage their WIOA efforts to coordinate child care and transportation services for residents to increase their participation in workforce preparedness, education attainment and employment services. WIOA funds may be transferred to programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and TANF to support the needs of low-income residents seeking and obtaining employment who also struggle with food insecurity. Funding for SNAP and TANF are top policy priorities for counties as they offer flexibility in program standards and local administration of services for both low-income parents and their children.^{xix} Additionally, some localities leverage TANF funding to provide financial assistance for recipients to engage them in post-secondary educational or professional certificate and/or licensing programs.

Coordination among behavioral health services and TANF can increase recipients' access to counseling to help them cope with life stressors and manage behavioral, mental, emotional or substance abuse issues that often become barriers to employment. For instance, in **Allegheny County, Pa.**, the county community college and human services department's partnership on the navigator program also includes a behavioral health and housing component to the model. This approach helps address underlying factors that often hinder educational attachment and employment.

Similar to WIOA, TANF is also coordinated with child care programs for recipients to access affordable, quality child care for their children while they work or seek employment. When income eligibility programs such as TANF, SNAP and child care subsidy are well coordinated with WIOA, they can help eliminate economic barriers affecting participation in work and education, improve the customer experience and streamline case management services for low-income residents. Coordination can occur within a local WIOA one stop career centers or person-centered, integrated human services systems.

“TANF programs help facilitate recipients in meeting their education and employment goals but can also coach parents in supporting their children and achieving economic security for their household. TANF eligibility varies based on state and local income eligibility standards, household size and earnings and other factors. Meanwhile, workforce agencies are better connected to training providers and have more intensive employer relationships than TANF welfare-to-work programs. For these and other reasons, experts suggest that aligning programs will reduce duplication of services (such as resource rooms for job search) and generate cost savings.”

—[The Center for Law and Social Policy](#)

²WIOA uses outcome measures like employment and earnings, while TANF uses a different type of measure called Work Participation Rate (WPR). The WPR is a process measure, showing whether recipients were present at countable activities for the required number of hours. It does not measure whether these activities increased the participants' subsequent employment or earnings. To receive credit toward the WPR, states must monitor and document all hours of participation. This distinction has been well-documented as a barrier to coordination between TANF and workforce systems. Cielinski, A. (May 2017). *Coordinating TANF & WIOA High Interest, Slow Progress During Early Days of WIOA*. The Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from: <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2017/08/Coordinating-TANF-and-WIOA.pdf>

County Coordination with Local Industry

County leaders are partnering with post-secondary education institutions, local businesses and major corporations, chambers of commerce and workforce development boards to identify and develop programming designed to build the skills needed for local jobs. They are leading collective impact approaches to bridge the human capital needs of residents to the workforce needs of local employers.

Data sharing among intergovernmental and private industry partners increases transparency and can help solve community problems such as unemployment, lack of job growth and limited post-secondary education programs that prepare residents for local jobs. For example, **Wilson County, N.C.'s** NCWorks has a data dashboard where job seekers and employers can gain access to local labor market data and post-secondary education matriculation rates. Employers and job seekers can learn about the occupations in high demand and the educational, job and salary requirements necessary for being a competitor in today's job market.^{xx}

Holding regular meetings with cross-sector partners, including post-secondary education institution leaders, workforce development directors and local employers, can facilitate collaboration on higher-education programming, curricula, and training and credential programs designed to prepare jobseekers with the skills needed for local industry jobs. Cross-sector partners can also coordinate on programming for internships and apprenticeships that create a pipeline for career readiness, upward mobility and job success. Recognizing the tremendous growth in health care innovation, research and technology, **Tarrant County, Texas** government, post-secondary education institutions and hospitals partner with medical centers to hire directly from the county's university and college medical and nursing programs. Local officials work with the North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth to offer internship opportunities, hands-on-training and part-time employment for future medical workers and technicians. Leveraging these approaches can help build a highly qualified and well-trained workforce, create job opportunities in small businesses and support growing and emerging industries that drive the local economy.



State and Local Coordination

Counties also coordinate with state and city governments to improve policy, increase funding, streamline services and systems building efforts and share data to promote career readiness opportunities for residents. **About half (49 percent) of counties partner with state or city government on issues affecting post-secondary education, according to the leaders who responded to NACo's survey.**

Cities and counties have been coming together to create regional approaches for strengthening educational and career pathways and partnering with local community colleges. They share data and information on student enrollment and basic needs and identify and assess the educational and work preparedness needs of local industries. In many counties, WDBs are the lead partners that bring together multiple municipalities and coordinate local efforts with the state.

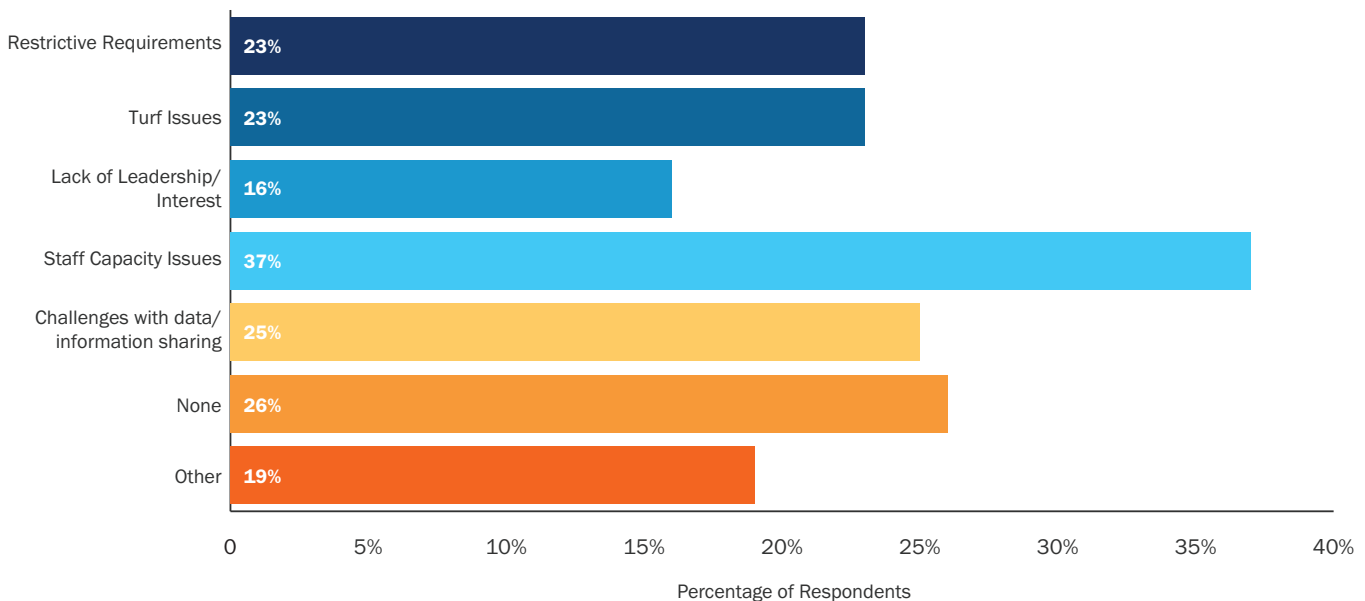
In **Allegheny County, Pa.** for example, one WDB represents both the city of Pittsburgh and the county of Allegheny on their workforce efforts. Additionally, **Erie County, Pa.'s** workforce development board is regional and brings together elected officials from five counties. Several Arizona

counties participate in a statewide education improvement initiative. For example, **Santa Cruz, Ariz.** is a member of its local higher education consortium and **Coconino County, Ariz.** is part of the Arizona Tri-Universities for Indian Education to improve educational attainment and opportunities for Native American residents.

While there are benefits in collaborating multiple sectors and systems, there are also some challenges and barriers. NACo asked counties about the barriers in coordinating higher education with other systems such as human services, workforce and employment. **Thirty-seven (37) percent of county leaders reported that staff capacity is a significant barrier.** Other challenges include turf wars, restrictive requirements (mostly from the state) and challenges with data sharing. Moreover, lack of clarifying roles when leading cross-systems collaboration efforts and misalignment of interests across systems were also key barriers.

As counties start to work with public and private partners, local leaders can plan ahead to clarify roles and needs and consider thinking through and voicing asks in the beginning stages of planning. Counties can also consider collective impact approaches and action planning methods for bringing together cross-sector partners.^{xxi}

Figure 4: Barriers In Coordinating Higher Education With Other County-Based Systems Such As Workforce Development, Employment and/or Human Services



Slowing the spread of COVID-19

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic greatly impacts America's counties. County leaders are making crucial decisions daily and employees and first responders are on the front lines helping to support residents in response to this pandemic. Counties are implementing intergovernmental efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19. They are increasing resources for COVID-19 testing, contact tracing and health care services for residents testing positive with the virus while mitigating negative impacts on local economies, jobs, and budgets.

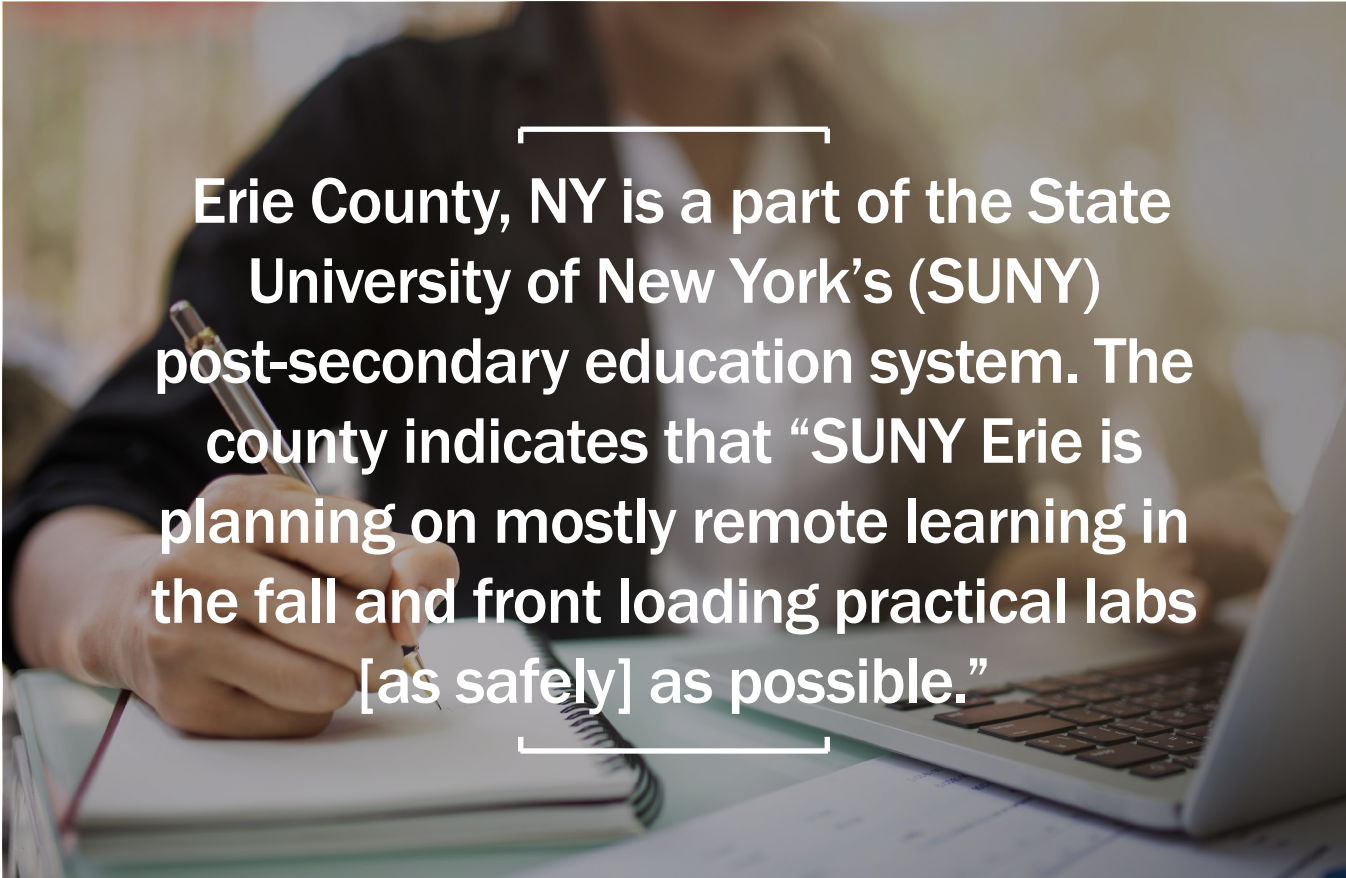
As post-secondary education leaders consider standards for reopening, many institutions have applied a combination of in-person, distance learning and hybrid approaches to promote health and safety standards for students, educators and other staff. Some institutions have completely shifted to online educational activities where possible and others have implemented in-person learning with social distancing, mask use and other safety measures to keep individuals healthy and safe. In **Durham County, N.C.**, post-secondary education institutions offer online learning only. The county scaled back funding for student housing as dormitories are not in use during the pandemic. Higher education institutions also reduced classroom sizes and prioritized in-person learning for freshman and senior classes, which are crucial milestones in students' lives.

Reopening policies for post-secondary education systems may differ based on program and institution type. For instance, technical, vocational and applied studies institutions with nursing, construction and mechanical courses that require in-person instruction are applying health and safety standards to continue educational coursework and activities during the pandemic. Post-secondary education institutions have leveraged federal, state and local guidance to inform social distancing practices among students and sanitation standards for educational tools and materials that require hands on use. In **Dakota County, Minn.**, the community college is now 95 percent online, with campus involvement reserved for labs and clinicals. Meanwhile, the county's technical college has about 40 percent of its course instruction and programs using an on-campus approach. In these settings, mask requirements, reduced classroom sizes, thermometer checks, testing and contact tracing are being used to prevent the spread.

“According to NACo’s survey, about 50% of county leaders believe that post-secondary education institutions will see budgetary impacts as a result of COVID-19. Of those counties, about 20% are providing aid to the higher education sector to offer immediate support and help sustain institutions during the pandemic.”

Source: National Association of Counties





Erie County, NY is a part of the State University of New York's (SUNY) post-secondary education system. The county indicates that “SUNY Erie is planning on mostly remote learning in the fall and front loading practical labs [as safely] as possible.”

County health departments have also played a lead role in collaborating with post-secondary education institutions. County health departments protect residents and communities by offering a wide range of services like administering flu shots, providing health information and preventing and responding to public health emergencies.^{xxii} From hospitals and emergency rooms to clinical care facilities, counties operate the systems that serve residents beyond COVID-19. Counties provide critical health services that keep residents healthy from the time they are born to the time they grow old. Counties also often have significant responsibilities for behavioral and mental health services and care, which has been essential for serving residents during the pandemic and beyond. These services have been working in coordination with higher education to ensure that students' well-being is addressed and basic needs are being met, especially during this public health crisis. This effort has become paramount as educational facilities and programs reopen.

Counties also leverage the fiscal year (FY) 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) supplemental funding to provide one-time support to health centers in

the detection, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of COVID-19. Counties used CARES funding to maintain and expand health center capacity and staffing levels to help address coronavirus-related conditions and emergency efforts.^{xxiii} County leaders are also leveraging local resources to create informational and educational materials for promoting COVID-19 health and safety measures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and statewide policies. These materials are often posted in local facilities and spaces, such as hallways of post-secondary education institutions. Like other facilities, colleges and universities are posting “6-feet apart” stickers on walkways for students to maintain social distancing standards.

In **Erie County, Pa.** the county health department worked with colleges and universities over the summer to prepare for the fall semester. Health department leaders held daily calls with pandemic coordinators at various higher institutions, especially when COVID-19 cases were rising in the county. **Tarrant County, Texas** regularly convenes stakeholders, including post-secondary education leaders to collect and share data and discuss potential re-opening policies for colleges and universities in the county.

The county also works with post-secondary education institutions to deploy medical residents and interns and nursing students in county health centers to expand public health services to residents exposed to the virus. During the pandemic, **Yavapai County, Ariz.** used state and county data to develop a phased reentry plan for reopening local colleges and universities. These precautions will continue as counties track COVID-19 cases and data trends and any changes in state policies and regional efforts.

During the 2020 economic downturn, county governments and community colleges have closely monitored any potential negative impacts on higher education expenses as a result of the pandemic. Post-secondary education leaders have had to make tough decisions like cutting operational and program costs and furloughing staff. Job positions that have been mostly impacted include custodial and maintenance workers who are not able to work remotely and where there is a limited need for services and use of certain campus facilities. In Allegheny County and at the beginning of April 2020, CCAC furloughed 116 part-time employees and reduced full-time staffs' work schedules to cut costs.^{xxiii} However, CCAC was able to continue their health care benefits while furloughed. While some higher education institutions were able to leverage CARES funding for immediate relief, there is great recognition that government investments and cross-sector partnerships are needed to help sustain post-secondary education systems and programs.

Counties are
involved in
promoting public
health through
**1,943 local health
departments.**

Source: [National Association of Counties](#)

Conclusion

County authority in post-secondary education differs across the United States. While local governments may not have direct oversight over colleges and universities, county leaders generally contribute to decision-making boards and bodies affecting higher education institutions. County officials and agency directors tend to serve on university and college boards, participate in and lead WIOA and other cross-sector initiatives to promote career readiness opportunities for residents and they engage in statewide and regional efforts bringing programs and funding to scale. Counties also make direct funding allocations to post-secondary education systems within their jurisdictions, particularly to support operations and facilities costs, financial aid for tuition assistance and equipment to help students prepare for local jobs.

Understanding the various state and county governance structures, authorities and available services is critical for county leaders seeking to identify the right levers to pull to ensure high-quality jobs can be filled by county residents. NACo's research suggests that cross-sector partnerships are critical for advancing strong post-secondary education systems that promote human capital and help residents gain the necessary skills for being competitive in today's local job market.



For a county's most vulnerable residents, county-based human services systems play a role in helping to reduce barriers to education and employment. Residents experiencing economic hardship, food insecurity and employment barriers often interface with multiple programs and systems to gain support in obtaining training and employment. These programs and systems usually operate in silos, offering duplicative services to common problems. Multiple touchpoints for food assistance, child welfare and care, child support, reentry and workforce development systems can be challenging for consumers to navigate and find the resources they need to develop relevant skills. NACo's research also shows that counties can be critical actors in driving integration across economic development, workforce and human services systems and in promoting community college enrollment for local residents.

Moreover, county leaders can leverage their partnerships with local chambers of commerce and industry executives to explore what skills are needed for today's jobs and where local industry is headed. By being proactive about the future of work in local communities, county leaders can help increase employment opportunities by guiding the

development of higher education programming matched to the skills needed for high-quality jobs in local industries. They can also use data to identify and address disparities affecting long-term, sustainable employment outcomes. County elected officials and directors of human services agencies and workforce development boards can use that information to improve post-secondary educational programming and leverage their partnership to increase enrollment, particularly for low-income residents and others experiencing barriers in achieving gainful employment. This approach can help shift the mindset of "having a job" to "sustaining a career" and support transitions from welfare to work.

Through coordination and collaboration, counties can create a comprehensive, multifaceted system of educational and employment supports that lead to improved outcomes for residents. National models and resources are needed for counties to develop and maintain coordinated cross-sector partnerships with post-secondary education systems, local industry and human services in pursuit of strategic workforce development plans that are person-centered and support local economic growth.



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About NACoRF

The National Association of Counties Research Foundation (NACoRF) is a non-profit organization recognized by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service as a 501c3 public charity providing education, technical assistance and research to counties. NACoRF's mission is to ascertain, develop and distribute knowledge about county governments and training of public officials, prospective public officials and other interested parties.

About the Counties Futures Lab

The NACo Counties Future Lab brings together leading national experts to examine and forecast the trends, innovations and promises of county government with an eye toward positioning America's county leaders for success. Focusing primarily on pressing county governance and management issues — and grounded in analytics, data and knowledge sharing — the Lab delivers research studies, reports and other actionable intelligence to a variety of venues in collaboration with corporate, academic and philanthropic thought leaders to promote the county government of the future.

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