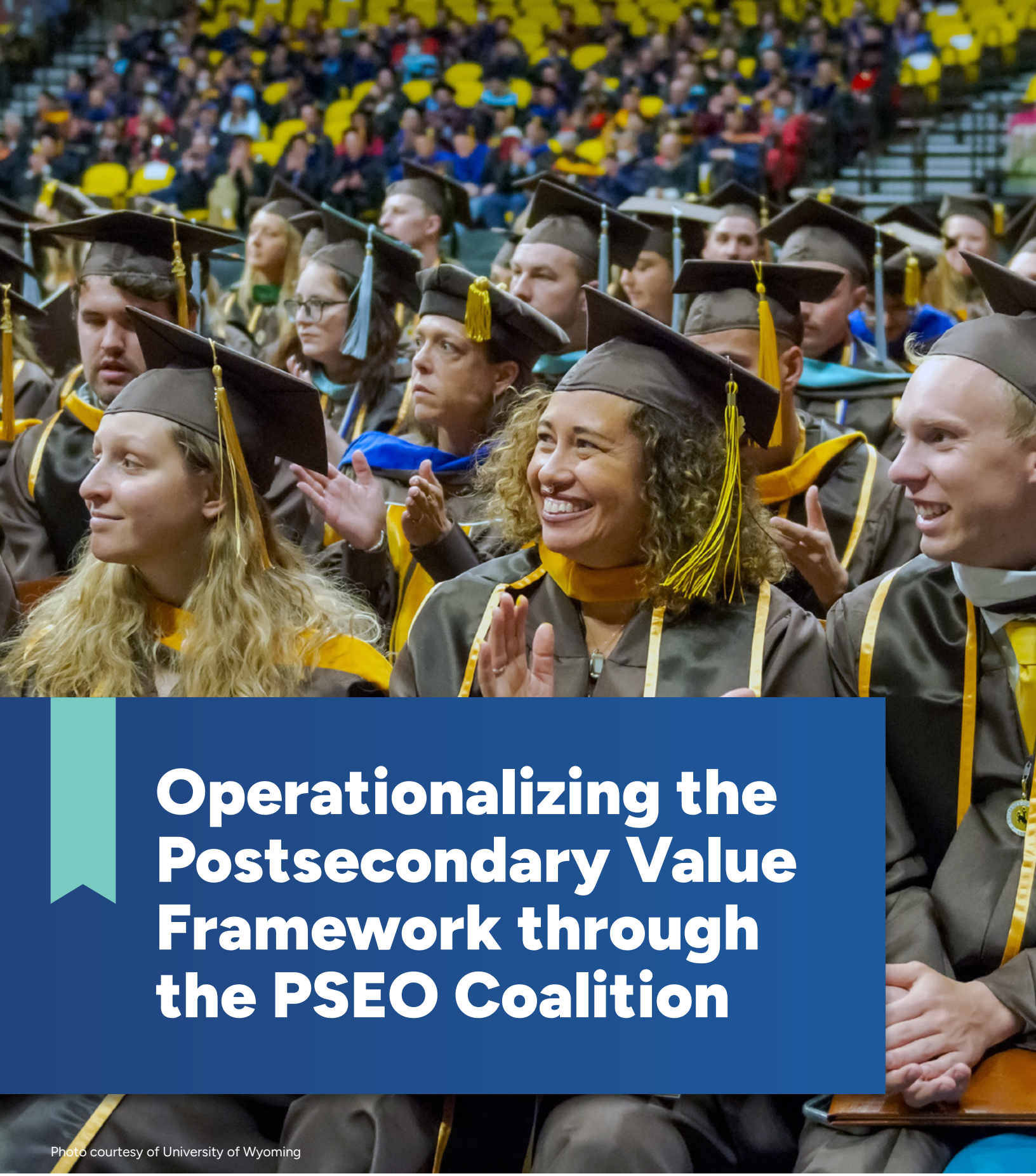

Operationalizing the Postsecondary Value Framework through the PSEO Coalition

Photo courtesy of University of Wyoming

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PSEO COALITION

Contents

Executive Summary

Questions about the value of postsecondary education are now central to state and federal policy. Rising costs, changing labor markets, and new accountability rules have increased pressure on colleges and universities to show clear benefits for students. At the same time, leaders worry that narrow metrics focused only on earnings can misrepresent the broader contributions of postsecondary education and erode public trust.

The Postsecondary Value Framework (PVF), developed by the Postsecondary Value Commission, responds to this challenge. It offers a multidimensional, equity-focused way to think about value that includes both economic returns and broader benefits for students and communities. A key feature of the PVF is a set of economic thresholds, from basic minimum economic return (Threshold 0) earnings premiums, parity, and mobility, and ultimately to wealth and wealth parity (Threshold 5). These thresholds give states, systems, and institutions a structured way to ask whether students are better off because of their education and whether those gains are shared equitably.

For the PSEO Coalition, which brings together states, systems, and institutions that use linked education and workforce data, the PVF provided a useful organizing lens. The PVF Implementation Community was created to help members test how PVF concepts and thresholds could work in their own contexts.

The initiative articulated four broad goals for participants:

1. **Framework literacy:** Build capacity across stakeholders (leadership, faculty, staff) to articulate and apply the PVF.
2. **Data-driven analysis:** Analyze student outcomes using institutional and workforce data aligned with PVF thresholds.
3. **Stakeholder communication:** Share findings with campus leaders, policymakers, and students in ways that drive engagement and trust.
4. **Policy and practice alignment:** Use insights from the PVF to inform institutional strategies, student advising, and program review.

Participation was voluntary and flexible. Some members, such as the Iowa Board of Regents, Colorado Department of Higher Education, the University System of Georgia, and the University of Minnesota System, used the initiative to run targeted analyses and dashboards using Threshold 0 and earnings premium concepts. Others, including Connecticut State Colleges & Universities, Minnesota State, and the University of Hawai'i System, concentrated on understanding the framework, assessing data readiness, and clarifying what would be required to move toward analysis. West Virginia and New Jersey focused on how PVF-aligned measures could be woven into definitions of "credentials of value" and existing statewide reports.

Across these varied starting points, several common themes emerged:

- **Implementation is about readiness and choice**, not just adopting a framework. Participants had to decide what scope and pace made sense given their data, staff, and policy environment.
- **Data readiness shapes what is possible.** Access to linked education and workforce data, as well as comfort with their limitations, was the main factor determining whether teams produced analyses, pilots, or planning documents.
- **Communication is as hard as analysis.** Participants worried that value metrics could be misunderstood or politicized if released without context. Those who planned communication strategies in parallel with analysis were better able to use results constructively.
- **Institutionalization, not publication, is the real goal.** The most durable work connected PVF concepts to existing reports, statutory mandates, program review, or planning processes, rather than producing standalone dashboards.

Viewed through the four project goals, the initiative showed that framework literacy grows when tied to real questions and data; that analytic progress depends on readiness, clear methods, and disciplined scope; that communication requires intentional framing for different audiences; and that aligning with policy and practice is an ongoing, multi-year effort.

From this experience, the report identifies four recommendations for the next phase of PVF work within the PSEO Coalition:

1. **Provide deeper, differentiated technical assistance** that includes analyst-to-analyst support and documented implementation pathways for entities at different stages of readiness.
2. **Develop practical implementation guidance**, such as a PVF guidebook and state or system briefs that reflect real decision points and tradeoffs.
3. **Expand support for communicating postsecondary value**, helping participants turn analyses into narratives and products that build understanding and trust.
4. **Align PVF work with federal and state accountability efforts** so that value measures reinforce, rather than duplicate, existing reporting and policy requirements.

Taken together, these recommendations highlight the importance of intermediary-led support. The PVF Implementation Community showed that states and systems are willing to engage deeply with questions of value, but they need structured, context-sensitive help to do so responsibly. Going forward, the PSEO Coalition will continue to serve as a convener, translator, and capacity builder, helping its members embed postsecondary value measures in ways that are methodologically sound, policy-relevant, and attentive to equity.

Introduction

Questions about the value of postsecondary education have become increasingly central to state and federal policy discussions. Rising costs, shifting labor market demands, and new accountability requirements have intensified scrutiny of postsecondary outcomes – particularly earnings, employment, and return on investment. At the same time, many state and institutional leaders have expressed concern that narrow or decontextualized metrics risk oversimplifying the contributions of postsecondary education and undermining public trust.

The PSEO Coalition sits at the intersection of these pressures. As a national network of states, systems, and institutions using linked education and workforce data, the Coalition has focused on strengthening members' capacity to produce and use postsecondary employment outcomes data responsibly. The PVF Implementation Community builds on this foundation by offering a structured way to engage with questions of value while maintaining flexibility for local context.

Within the Coalition's broader education-to-workforce mission, the PVF initiative serves three purposes. First, it provides a shared conceptual anchor for conversations about value that extends beyond earnings alone. Second, it creates space for members to test how PVF-aligned metrics could be integrated into existing reporting and accountability structures. Third, it allows the Coalition to learn collectively and in real time about what kinds of supports are most effective for implementation.

This report is intended for multiple audiences. State and system leaders will find insights relevant to policy design and reporting strategies. Institutional researchers and analysts will see their implementation challenges reflected and contextualized. Funders and partners will gain a clearer picture of what it takes to move from framework adoption to sustained use. Throughout, the report emphasizes applied learning over prescription.

The Postsecondary Value Framework

The Postsecondary Value Framework (PVF) was developed by the Postsecondary Value Commission, a national panel of leaders from higher education, policy, business, and advocacy fields convened to advance a more equitable and comprehensive understanding of what postsecondary education delivers for students and society.

At its core, the PVF is anchored in three interconnected ideas:

- **Value is multidimensional.** It includes economic returns such as earnings and wealth accumulation, but also non-economic benefits like civic engagement, personal well-being, and opportunities for social mobility.
- **Value must be equitable.** The framework explicitly centers the experiences of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, emphasizing that institutions and systems should be evaluated on how well they generate equitable value for all learners, including Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income students.
- **Value should be actionable.** By providing a structured way to define, measure, and interpret outcomes, the PVF is meant to support decision-making at institutional, state, and policy levels, not just to produce rankings or scores.

The PVF is not a single score or ranking; it is a set of principles and measurement concepts that guide how value is defined and reported. Its tiered structure offers multiple ways to understand outcomes depending on data availability, analytic capacity, and the questions of interest to users.

Core Elements of the Framework

The central component of the Postsecondary Value Framework most relevant to the PSEO Coalition is a series of economic value thresholds that describe how much and in what ways students are better off because of their education. These thresholds are designed to be used with outcomes data, such as earnings measured after students enter the workforce, to assess whether students achieve meaningful economic returns. They also provide a structured way to think about equity by comparing outcomes for different student groups.

Threshold 0: Minimum Economic Return

This is the most fundamental benchmark. A student meets this threshold if their earnings are at least as high as those of a typical high school graduate and sufficient for the student to have recouped their total net price of attendance (including interest on loans) within 10 years. This threshold focuses on whether participation in postsecondary education yields a basic economic return above what a comparable high school graduate would earn.

Threshold 1: Earnings Premium

Under this threshold, students meet the benchmark if they reach at least the median earnings for their field of study (or, when field-specific data are unavailable, for the predominant credential type awarded by the institution). This threshold moves beyond a simple return to examine whether education confers a typical earnings advantage relative to peers.

Threshold 2: Earnings Parity

Earnings Parity shifts focus toward equity. It measures whether students from historically underserved groups – such as students of color, low-income students, and women – reach the median earnings of their more advantaged peers. By centering comparisons across groups, this threshold highlights persistent pay gaps and raises questions about equitable economic outcomes.

Threshold 3: Economic Mobility

This threshold benchmarks student earnings against broader economic mobility goals. Students meet it if their earnings are at a level consistent with entering the upper-middle income range (often conceptualized as the fourth income quintile, between the 60th and 80th percentiles), regardless of field of study. This threshold reflects not just relative advantage but movement into a higher economic stratum.

Threshold 4: Economic Security

Economic Security recognizes that earnings alone may not fully capture individuals' financial stability. It assesses whether students reach median levels of wealth – an indicator of the ability to withstand life's financial shocks and build financial resilience. Because wealth data are not yet widely available in public sources, this threshold currently serves as a conceptual goal in many implementations.

Threshold 5: Wealth Parity

Similar to Earnings Parity, Wealth Parity measures whether historically underserved students attain the level of wealth held by their more advantaged peers. Like Threshold 4, this threshold points to a deeper dimension of economic value – accumulated resources over a lifetime – but is often not yet operationalized due to data limitations in publicly available sources.

Postsecondary Value Framework: Economic Value Thresholds

Threshold	What It Measures	Core Question	Typical Data Used	Implementation Notes
Threshold 0: Minimum Economic Return	Whether postsecondary education provides a basic economic return above high school	*Do graduates earn at least as much as a high school graduate and recoup their net price of attendance within 10 years?*	Earnings (UI, PSEO, ACS), cost of attendance, and/or net price	Most commonly implemented threshold; often aligned with state ROI or "break-even" analyses
Threshold 1: Earnings Premium	Whether graduates earn a typical or expected earnings advantage	*Do graduates earn at least the median earnings for their field or credential type?*	Earnings by field or credential	Requires field-level earnings data; sensitive to methodology and field definitions
Threshold 2: Earnings Parity	Equity in earnings outcomes across student groups	*Do historically underserved students reach the median earnings of their more advantaged peers?*	Disaggregated earnings by race, income, and gender	Highlights equity gaps; often constrained by sample size and disclosure rules
Threshold 3: Economic Mobility	Movement into a higher income stratum	*Do graduates earn enough to reach upper-middle income levels, regardless of background?*	Earnings compared to income distribution	Increasingly of interest to policymakers; definitions vary by context
Threshold 4: Economic Security	Financial stability and resilience	*Do graduates achieve earnings or wealth levels associated with long-term financial security?*	Earnings and/or wealth indicators	Often conceptual; limited by availability of wealth data
Threshold 5: Wealth Parity	Equity in accumulated wealth	*Do underserved students accumulate wealth at levels comparable to their advantaged peers?*	Wealth data	Aspirational in most implementations due to data constraints

This set of thresholds provides users with a stepped way to think about student outcomes from basic economic return to broader economic security and equity. Across implementations, the thresholds offer a common anchor for understanding how postsecondary outcomes translate into economic advantage and mobility.

Why the Framework Matters

The PVF emerged from a broader public conversation about the value of higher education in the context of rising costs, widening income inequality, and concerns about accountability. By emphasizing both measurable economic outcomes and systemic equity, the framework offers a balanced and forward-looking way for leaders to think about what success looks like for students and for communities.

Importantly for this initiative, the PVF was not presented as a prescriptive system to be implemented wholesale, but as a strategic orientation that could be adapted to different state and institutional contexts. This adaptability enabled participants to explore different metrics, data sources, and reporting formats that aligned with their policy priorities and analytic capabilities.

Initiative Design & Support Model

The PVF Implementation Community was designed to support learning across diverse contexts. Participants included the various members of the PSEO Coalition: statewide higher education agencies (e.g., Iowa Board of Regents, Colorado Department of Higher Education), multi-institution systems (e.g., California State University, Minnesota State), and individual institutions (e.g., Northern Arizona University), each operating under different policy, data, and capacity constraints.

The initiative articulated four broad goals for participants:

1. **Framework literacy:** Build capacity across stakeholders (leadership, faculty, staff) to articulate and apply the PVF.
2. **Data-driven analysis:** Analyze student outcomes using institutional and workforce data aligned with PVF thresholds.
3. **Stakeholder communication:** Share findings with campus leaders, policymakers, and students in ways that drive engagement and trust.
4. **Policy and practice alignment:** Use insights from the PVF to inform institutional strategies, student advising, and program review.

To support these goals, the Coalition provided a combination of:

- Regular community calls and peer exchange,
- office hours and targeted technical conversations,
- opportunities for participants to share interim work and receive feedback, and
- light-touch coordination to surface cross-cutting themes and resources.

Participation was voluntary for members of the PSEO Coalition, and participants were not expected to reach the same endpoint. Some, such as Colorado and Iowa, were already operating under legislative directives related to return on investment (ROI) and value and used the initiative to refine or contextualize existing work. Others, including Montana and Connecticut, focused on foundational steps such as identifying data sources, comparing methodologies, and building internal understanding. This flexible design allowed each participating entity to engage in a way most relevant for their context.

Participating Systems and Institutions: Areas of Focus

Participants in the PVF Implementation Community entered the initiative with different policy contexts, data maturity levels, and institutional roles. Rather than pursuing a single prescribed set of activities, each state, system, or institution identified a focused area of work aligned with its priorities and capacity. In addition to the organizations listed below, representatives from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and City University of New York served as leaders and mentors for participants, sharing their experience and outcomes with the PVF through monthly meetings and office hours.

The summaries below describe what each participant chose to tackle during the implementation period.

California State University System

California State University System (CSU) emphasized extending and contextualizing existing public earnings dashboards within the framework of the PVF. The system focused primarily on Threshold 0 (Minimum Economic Return) and Threshold 2 (Earnings Parity), while exploring future work related to economic mobility. CSU framed this work within its broader "CSU Promise" and student success commitments, highlighting cultural and organizational considerations alongside technical ones.

Colorado Department of Higher Education

Colorado used the implementation community to advance and contextualize its Minimum Value Threshold (MVT) model, developed in response to state legislation. The team focused on refining methodology, aligning value metrics with statutory requirements, and situating economic outcomes alongside social and workforce considerations. Colorado's work illustrates how PVF-aligned concepts can be embedded within formal policy and reporting structures.

Connecticut State Colleges & Universities

Connecticut State Colleges & Universities (CSCU) used the implementation period primarily to build internal literacy and readiness around the PVF. The decision support team focused on understanding PVF components, comparing them to emerging federal accountability requirements, and assessing whether existing data assets were sufficient to support Threshold 0 or Threshold 1 analyses. Through this process, CSCU determined that additional wage data, likely requiring new data-sharing agreements with the Connecticut Department of Labor, would be necessary to operationalize PVF metrics in the future.

District of Columbia Office of Education through Employment Pathways

Although the District of Columbia was not able to participate in the monthly community meetings of the PVF Implementation Community, representatives from the Office of Education Through Employment Pathways (ETEP) accessed technical assistance through office hours to produce a public report and interactive dashboard using the PSEO data. ETEP reports and dashboards illustrate employment and earnings outcomes for graduates of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), emphasizing lifetime earnings, return on investment, and alignment with high-demand industries.

Iowa Board of Regents

Iowa concentrated on statewide workforce alignment and return-on-investment analysis to inform program review and policy conversations. The team examined break-even calculations, enrollment thresholds, and program-level outcomes using PSEO and other publicly available data for bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and professional programs. The PVF provided a lens for organizing and communicating findings that were later elevated in board-level and public discussions and will be added to existing dashboards on the Iowa Board of Regents website.

Minnesota State

Minnesota State focused on preparatory technical work to support future Threshold 0 analyses, with particular attention to comparing PSEO data and state UI wage records. The system examined how data source choice affects coverage for border institutions, assessed the feasibility of identifying appropriate high school earnings comparators, and began conceptualizing a summary dataset that could be integrated into existing graduate follow-up and outcomes reporting processes. This work emphasized data readiness and methodological decision-making rather than immediate publication.

Montana University System

Montana focused on exploratory analysis and legislative context-setting, building understanding of the Threshold 0 metrics and how they relate to state mandates and federal policy. The system prioritized learning from peer states, clarifying methodological options, and assessing how best to leverage existing data infrastructure given resource constraints.

New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education

The New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) focused on building agency-wide literacy around the PVF while integrating selected PVF measures into existing statewide reporting and policy contexts. During the implementation period, the team developed internal summaries linking current completion-to-earnings dashboards and reports to PVF concepts and planned for the inclusion of equity-focused PVF measures in the state's annual Benefits of Education report. Longer-term work includes aligning PVF-informed metrics with statute, institutional accountability conversations, and participation in the PSEO data submission process.

Northern Arizona University

Northern Arizona University (NAU) undertook a hands-on data pilot connecting institutional records with Arizona wage data and PSEO data to test PVF-aligned analyses. The institution focused on resolving methodological alignment issues, such as treatment of continuing enrollment, inflation adjustments, and wage inclusion criteria, and began developing a Tableau dashboard to share findings internally and externally.

South Carolina Department of Employment & Workforce

The South Carolina Department of Employment & Workforce focused on developing a robust, PVF-informed return-on-investment analysis for credentials awarded by in-state institutions, with the explicit goal of producing a formal report and supporting data products. During the implementation period, the team concentrated on building PVF literacy; assembling educational, economic, and equity-related data; and designing analyses that would incorporate PVF-aligned metrics into an expanded statewide ROI framework. This work was positioned to inform stakeholders and guide future reporting and decision-making.

University of Alabama System

The University of Alabama System focused on equipping campuses to use labor market and earnings data more effectively to support student economic mobility and program alignment. The team explored multiple data sources – including PSEO, state wage data, and third-party tools – to inform dashboards and degree planning resources.

University of Hawai'i System

The University of Hawai'i System approached the initiative as an opportunity for exploratory data mapping and literacy-building. The team focused on understanding how PSEO data and PVF concepts could complement existing reporting, while navigating competing priorities and legislative requests. Future plans include broader stakeholder engagement and eventual integration of PVF concepts into systemwide metrics.

University of Minnesota System

The University of Minnesota System (UMN) conducted a targeted analysis of the economic value of a UMN baccalaureate degree through a modified earnings premium approach. The team analyzed alumni earnings using two complementary benchmarks: national field-of-study earnings from the American Community Survey and state-level benchmarks derived from Minnesota UI wage data for both bachelor's and high school degree holders. This work resulted in draft policy briefs and interactive dashboards intended to inform institutional and system-level conversations about postsecondary value.

University System of Georgia

The University System of Georgia (USG) focused on advancing a proof-of-concept Threshold 0 (Minimum Economic Return) analysis toward a scalable, systemwide implementation plan. During the implementation period, USG finalized pilot dashboards for bachelor's degree completers, analyzed contributing factors influencing ROI outcomes, and presented findings to system leadership for feedback. The primary outcome of this work was a comprehensive implementation plan detailing refined methodology, additional data needs, staffing and resource requirements, and a timeline for expanding Threshold 0 analyses across degree levels.

West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission

The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC) focused on establishing a statewide policy and infrastructure framework for defining and measuring "credentials of value," with particular attention to microcredentials and non-degree offerings. During the implementation period, WVHEPC worked to finalize a statewide definition, develop operational metrics, and design quality assurance and data reporting frameworks that could support future funding and accountability mechanisms. The Commission also explored cross-state data-sharing opportunities to better understand employment outcomes, positioning PVF concepts as part of a broader system-level strategy rather than a standalone analysis.

Case Study

Iowa Board of Regents: Applying Postsecondary Value Concepts to Statewide Program Review

Context

The Iowa Board of Regents (BOR) began exploring program-level ROI as part of a broader effort to better understand how academic programs align with workforce outcomes and student economic opportunity. Although Iowa had discussed ROI concepts for several years, earlier approaches felt incomplete or overly complex. State leaders wanted a clearer way to communicate whether programs ultimately improved students' economic prospects.

Momentum increased when the BOR directed staff to conduct a comprehensive workforce alignment review across all academic programs. At that point, the BOR's data team began exploring whether elements of the PVF could help organize the analysis. Participation in the PSEO Coalition's PVF Implementation Community provided an opportunity to test how the framework could be applied flexibly rather than implemented in full.

The goal was not to adopt the framework wholesale, but to determine which components could meaningfully inform state decision-making.

Analytical Approach

Iowa ultimately focused on an approach aligned with PVF Threshold 0, Minimum Economic Return, reframing the concept in terms that would resonate with policymakers and the public. Rather than emphasizing the language of "minimum value," the team calculated "years to break even," defined as the number of years required for graduates to recoup the cost of their education through higher earnings compared with high school graduates.

This approach had several advantages:

- The methodology was transparent and explainable to non-technical audiences.
- Required data were readily available through existing sources.
- Results could be produced at the program level, enabling detailed analysis across the system.

The BOR incorporated these calculations into a broader workforce alignment study that examined program enrollment, completion, earnings outcomes, and labor market demand across all programs offered by Iowa's public universities.

Implementation Process

Implementing the analysis required both technical and organizational coordination. The BOR assembled a cross-institutional team of institutional researchers, data analysts, and academic leaders from across the state's universities.

Two implementation choices were particularly important.

1. **Use of public data sources.**
   To ensure the work could be maintained over time, the team relied primarily on publicly available data sources, including PSEO, rather than complex institutional data integrations.
2. **Transparent methodology.**
   The formula for calculating break-even timelines was designed to be simple enough that policymakers and institutional leaders could easily understand how results were produced.

Despite the technical feasibility of the analysis, the implementation process revealed that the most challenging work involved building trust and managing interpretation. Faculty and academic leaders initially expressed concern that the analysis might be used to eliminate programs or narrow the range of academic programs offered. As a result, the BOR emphasized that the purpose was to understand patterns and inform discussions rather than impose simple judgments about program quality.

The results also helped shift the conversation in important ways. While programs differed in how quickly graduates recouped educational costs, every program examined ultimately showed a positive return compared with entering the workforce with only a high school diploma.

Key Insights

Several insights emerged from Iowa's implementation work.

Methodological assumptions matter.

The team found that ROI estimates vary significantly depending on assumptions about student borrowing. Analyses assuming students borrowed the full cost of attendance produced very different timelines than those assuming median borrowing or no debt. The Iowa BOR is now exploring how they might present alternative methodologies examining also examining median borrowing and no debt.

Clear framing improves policy conversations.

Expressing outcomes as years to break even proved more accessible than traditional ROI calculations and helped policymakers understand program outcomes without oversimplifying them.

Economic value is only part of the story.

While the ROI analysis demonstrated strong economic outcomes overall, it also prompted broader conversations about how to measure programs' social and community contributions.

Looking Ahead

Building on the workforce alignment study, Iowa BOR is now exploring ways to expand the analysis in two directions. First, the BOR plans to integrate ROI measures into a broader public dashboard on program outcomes, making the information easier for students, families, and policymakers to access.

Second, the BOR is exploring the development of social and community impact metrics using employment outcomes data. While the ROI analysis provides insight into economic outcomes, the BOR identified the need for additional metrics that capture how programs contribute to public service, community wellbeing, and other forms of societal value.

These efforts reflect a growing recognition that understanding postsecondary value requires looking beyond earnings alone.

Advice for Other States

The Iowa Board of Regents' experience offers a practical lesson for states interested in exploring postsecondary value metrics: Start with a focused question rather than attempting to implement an entire framework.

By selecting one component of the Postsecondary Value Framework that aligned with existing policy priorities, the Iowa BOR was able to produce actionable analysis while building institutional trust and analytic capacity. The framework can be most useful when states follow the aspects that align with their own policy questions and data realities rather than treating implementation as an all-or-nothing exercise.

Implementation Themes: What Operationalizing the PVF Actually Entails

Reviewing action plans, presentations, and interim outputs across the PVF Implementation Community reveal a consistent finding: operationalizing the Postsecondary Value Framework is not a single technical exercise, but a staged systematic process. Participants did not converge on a uniform set of activities; instead, they navigated a series of interrelated decisions shaped by policy context, data readiness, organizational capacity, and intended use.

Five core implementation themes emerged across the cohort.

1. Implementation Is Primarily About Readiness and Choice, Not Framework Adoption

Across participants, there was little debate about the conceptual value of the PVF. Instead, the most consequential work involved deciding what level of engagement was feasible and appropriate within each context.

Some entities, such as the University of Minnesota System and Northern Arizona University, entered the initiative ready to conduct targeted analyses aligned to PVF thresholds. Others, such as Connecticut State Colleges & Universities and the University of Hawai'i System, used the implementation period to assess whether existing data assets and governance structures were sufficient to support PVF-aligned work at all.

This variation underscores a key insight: PVF implementation is not binary. Engagement often begins with literacy-building and feasibility assessment and may remain at that stage until external conditions (e.g., data-sharing agreements, staffing, policy demand) change.

2. Data Readiness Shapes the Pace and Scope of Work

Data availability and the limitations of available data proved to be the single most significant determinant of what participants could accomplish.

Several teams, including Minnesota State, Montana University System, and New Jersey OSHE, focused explicitly on comparing data sources (e.g., PSEO vs. state UI wage data), identifying gaps, and documenting methodological tradeoffs. Border institutions, small programs, and non-credit offerings surfaced as recurring challenges.

Even among participants producing analyses, methodological decisions were highly consequential. For example:

- University of Minnesota grappled with cross-walking ACS fields to CIP codes and avoiding benchmark contamination.
- Iowa Board of Regents confronted small-cell suppression and differing time-to-earnings patterns across credential levels.
- University System of Georgia identified data and staffing gaps that needed to be addressed before scaling a proof-of-concept analysis systemwide.

These experiences demonstrate that PVF-aligned metrics cannot simply be "plugged in"; they require deliberate adaptation to local data environments.

3. Threshold Selection Reflects Use Case More Than Ambition

Participants' choices about which PVF thresholds to explore were driven less by aspiration and more by intended use and feasibility.

Threshold 0 (Minimum Economic Return) was the most common focal point, particularly where ROI or accountability conversations were already underway (e.g., Iowa, Colorado, Georgia, South Carolina). Earnings premium-style analyses (aligned with Threshold 1) emerged where benchmarking against external comparators was central (e.g., University of Minnesota). Equity-oriented thresholds (e.g., Earnings Parity, Economic Mobility) were widely viewed as important but often deferred due to data limitations or sample-size concerns (e.g., New Jersey, Connecticut).

Importantly, several teams treated threshold exploration as a sequencing question, identifying what could be implemented now versus what would require longer-term investment.

4. Communication and Interpretation are as Challenging as Analysis

A consistent theme across presentations and action plans was that communicating value is not simply a downstream task. Participants raised concerns about misinterpretation, political sensitivity, and the risk of oversimplification.

Participating entities in states such as Iowa, Colorado, and New Jersey explicitly planned communications strategies alongside analysis, including board briefings, one-page summaries, and integration into existing reports. Others, such as Alabama, focused on using PVF-aligned metrics as a starting point for institutional dialogue rather than public judgment.

These experiences highlight that the act of publishing value metrics carries implicit risk and political consequences, and that successful implementation requires intentional framing.

5. Institutionalization, Not Publication, Is the Real Endpoint

Finally, participants consistently framed success not as producing a dashboard or report, but as embedding PVF-aligned thinking into existing data and reporting systems.

Examples include:

- Georgia's development of a formal implementation plan before scaling analyses.
- West Virginia's focus on statewide definitions and quality frameworks for credentials of value.
- New Jersey's effort to integrate PVF measures into an existing statutory report.
- Hawai'i's emphasis on internal literacy and governance before metric adoption.

Together, these efforts suggest that sustainable PVF implementation is inherently multi-year and closely tied to broader policy and data infrastructure decisions.

Case Study

Northern Arizona University: Piloting Postsecondary Value Analysis at the Institutional Level

Context

Northern Arizona University (NAU) approached the Postsecondary Value Framework (PVF) through a technical pilot designed to explore how existing data systems could be connected to better understand the long-term economic outcomes of graduates. The work was led by NAU's Office of Economic Mobility and Social Impact in collaboration with the university's Institutional Research team and data leadership.

The university joined the PSEO Coalition implementation community at a time when institutional leaders were increasingly interested in understanding how NAU programs contribute to economic mobility. While NAU already tracks traditional student success metrics such as completion rates, leadership wanted additional insight into how graduates fare in the labor market over time.

Rather than launching a public reporting initiative immediately, NAU chose to begin with a focused pilot. This approach allowed the team to test analytic methods, explore available data sources, and build internal capacity before expanding the work more broadly. It also reflected the realities of Arizona's higher education landscape, which includes multiple independent institutions and governing bodies rather than a centralized system.

Analytical Approach

The NAU pilot focused on linking several data sources to examine graduate earnings outcomes and test approaches to applying the Postsecondary Value Framework. The project connected NAU institutional data with National Student Clearinghouse enrollment records, Arizona Department of Economic Security wage data, and Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) earnings data.

Using these sources, the team analyzed graduate earnings one, five, and ten years after completion and benchmarked these outcomes against broader economic indicators, including median earnings for individuals with only a high school diploma. These benchmarks helped place program outcomes in context and allowed the university to examine how graduate earnings trajectories evolve over time.

The analysis demonstrated that while earnings vary by program and career pathway, graduates across all programs ultimately exceed high school earnings benchmarks. For some programs, earnings begin below

certain benchmarks immediately after graduation but surpass them within five to ten years, highlighting the importance of examining long-term outcomes when evaluating postsecondary value.

The pilot also surfaced methodological questions related to differences between state wage data and national datasets such as PSEO. These differences prompted additional exploration of how various data sources capture employment outcomes and how analytic decisions, such as the treatment of graduates who continue their education, can influence results.

Implementation Process

Implementing the pilot required significant technical work to extract and align data from multiple systems. The team identified relevant student populations, linked records across datasets, and developed analytic models to compare earnings outcomes using both state and national wage data.

The project also required collaboration across several campus offices. NAU's Institutional Research team provided expertise in managing institutional data and understanding student records, while analysts in the Office of Economic Mobility and Social Impact contributed visualization and analytic capacity. This partnership allowed the university to move beyond standard compliance reporting to conduct deeper exploration of graduate outcomes.

Findings from the pilot were shared internally with senior leadership, including the university president and administrative leadership. These conversations helped demonstrate how earnings data could complement existing measures of student success and provide a stronger evidence base for discussions about program outcomes and institutional strategy.

NAU also shared insights from the pilot with partners involved in the Arizona Attainment Alliance (A++), a statewide collaboration that brings together universities, community colleges, and workforce leaders to advance educational attainment goals. These conversations helped illustrate how improved data sharing and analysis could strengthen statewide understanding of education and workforce outcomes.

Key Insights

The pilot reinforced the long-term economic value of completing a bachelor's degree at NAU. While earnings outcomes vary across fields, graduates across all programs eventually outperform high school earnings benchmarks.

The project also highlighted the importance of examining outcomes over multiple time horizons. Short-term earnings alone may not fully reflect the value of a degree, particularly for fields where career advancement occurs gradually. Looking at outcomes five and ten years after graduation provided a more complete picture of the long-term value of postsecondary education.

Another insight from the work was the importance of data infrastructure and coordination. Arizona's decentralized higher education system makes it difficult to combine data across institutions and sectors.

Through the pilot, NAU leaders recognized the potential benefits of stronger statewide coordination around education and workforce data.

Looking Ahead

The NAU pilot sparked broader conversations about how Arizona institutions might better integrate education and workforce data to understand graduate outcomes. One area of particular interest is expanding participation in national datasets such as PSEO to include community colleges, which would provide a more complete view of transfer pathways and long-term outcomes for students who begin their education in two-year institutions.

The university is also exploring opportunities to combine multiple data sources, such as PSEO and the College Scorecard, to create a more comprehensive picture of postsecondary value that includes both earnings outcomes and measures such as student debt.

Advice for Other Institutions

NAU leaders emphasize that relationship-building is essential for institutions seeking to conduct this type of work, particularly in decentralized systems. Strong collaboration among institutions, state agencies, and workforce partners is necessary to make progress on data sharing and joint analysis.

They also recommend starting with manageable pilot projects rather than attempting to build comprehensive reporting systems immediately. Pilot analyses can help institutions understand available data, demonstrate the value of the work, and build momentum for broader collaboration.

Finally, combining multiple data sources can provide a more complete understanding of postsecondary value. Earnings data are an important indicator, but integrating additional information about student pathways, debt, and workforce outcomes can help institutions and policymakers better understand how higher education contributes to long-term economic mobility.

Lessons Learned from Implementation

The PVF Implementation Community was intentionally structured around four core goals: building framework literacy, conducting data-driven analysis, communicating with stakeholders, and aligning work with policy and practice. Reviewing participant action plans, presentations, and interim outputs through this lens reveals several lessons about what it takes to operationalize the Postsecondary Value Framework in varied state and institutional contexts.

Building Framework Literacy

Framework literacy is foundational, and it develops most effectively when paired with concrete application.

Participants consistently reported that understanding the PVF conceptually was achievable, particularly when supported by shared resources and peer discussion. However, literacy deepened most meaningfully when participants engaged the framework in relation to their own data, policy questions, or reporting responsibilities.

Several entities, including Connecticut State Colleges & Universities, University of Hawai'i System, and New Jersey OSHE, used the implementation period primarily to build internal understanding of PVF concepts and assess how they aligned with existing reports, accountability requirements, or leadership priorities. In these contexts, literacy-building was not a precursor to analysis so much as a parallel activity, often revealing data gaps or governance issues that needed to be addressed before further progress was possible.

This suggests that PVF literacy should be understood as an iterative process, reinforced through repeated exposure, applied examples, and internal dialogue, rather than as a one-time orientation or training.

Conducting Data-Driven Analysis

Analytic progress depends less on technical sophistication than on data readiness, methodological clarity, and scope discipline.

Participants entered the initiative with widely varying levels of data maturity. Those able to conduct analyses did so by narrowing scope, clearly defining benchmarks, and making deliberate methodological choices aligned to their use cases.

At the same time, several teams used the implementation period to determine that they were not yet positioned to produce PVF-aligned metrics. For example, Minnesota State and Connecticut State Colleges & Universities focused on comparing data sources and documenting limitations related to border institutions, wage coverage, and time-to-earnings requirements. These determinations helped prevent premature or misleading analyses.

Across contexts, participants emphasized the importance of:

- Selecting thresholds that match analytic intent and data capacity
- Documenting assumptions and limitations
- Treating early analyses as exploratory rather than definitive

Taken together, these experiences underscore that data-driven analysis under the PVF is as much about decision-making and readiness assessment as it is about computation.

Communicating with Stakeholders

Communicating postsecondary value requires intentional framing and cannot be treated as a downstream task.

Participants repeatedly raised concerns about how PVF-aligned analyses might be interpreted by policymakers, institutional leaders, or the public. Even when analyses were technically sound, teams anticipated risks related to oversimplification, politicization, or unintended comparisons.

As a result, several entities embedded communication considerations directly into their action plans. Iowa Board of Regents, for example, planned multiple formats such as board reports, one-page summaries, and program-level briefs, tailored to different audiences. New Jersey OSHE focused on integrating PVF measures into an existing annual report to provide continuity and context. University of Alabama System emphasized using value metrics to initiate campus conversations rather than to make summative judgments.

These approaches highlight a key lesson: effective communication of postsecondary value depends on narrative, context, and audience awareness, not just on publishing metrics. Participants viewed communication as a core implementation challenge requiring as much care as analytic design.

Aligning with Policy and Practice

PVF work gains durability when it is embedded in existing systems, mandates, and decision-making processes.

Participants consistently framed long-term success in terms of institutionalization, not standalone outputs. Where PVF-aligned work is connected to formal policy drivers or reporting cycles, it was more likely to advance beyond pilot status.

Examples include:

- University System of Georgia's use of a proof-of-concept analysis to inform a systemwide implementation plan
- West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission's integration of PVF concepts into statewide definitions and quality frameworks for credentials
- New Jersey OSHE's intent to align PVF measures with statute and agency reporting
- Colorado Department of Higher Education's embedding of minimum value concepts within legislatively required analyses

In contrast, participants without clear policy hooks emphasized the importance of gaining internal buy-in, building leadership understanding, clarifying governance roles, and identifying future integration points.

These experiences suggest that aligning PVF implementation with policy and practice is a multi-year effort, requiring coordination across data, leadership, and statutory environments.

Synthesis Across Goals

Across all four goals, a unifying lesson emerged: operationalizing the PVF is not a linear progression from literacy to analysis to publication to policy change. Instead, participants moved back and forth among these goals as new information surfaced and conditions evolved.

This reinforces the value of a phased, flexible implementation approach that recognizes clarity, readiness, and alignment as meaningful outcomes alongside analytic production.

Case Study

Washington, DC Office of Education Through Employment Pathways (ETEP): Using Postsecondary Employment Outcomes Data to Communicate the Value of a UDC Degree

Context

The Office of Education Through Employment Pathways (ETEP) was established by the District of Columbia in 2024 to better understand the impact of PK-12 education, higher education, and public workforce programs on access to opportunity. A central goal of the office has been to build an integrated education and workforce data system that can provide a clearer picture of the opportunities and supports that are setting DC residents up for economic mobility.

Early in this work, ETEP identified a significant challenge in understanding graduate outcomes. Because the District is geographically small and many graduates work in neighboring states, traditional state wage records capture only a portion of employment outcomes. As the team explored solutions, they became familiar with the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) data and the PSEO Coalition, which offered a way to examine earnings outcomes for graduates who leave the jurisdiction.

At the same time, the District and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) were interested in better understanding the economic value of a UDC degree. UDC is the District's only public university and plays a central role in the city's talent pipeline and economic mobility strategy. When UDC and ETEP joined the PSEO project in 2025, the availability of national earnings data created an opportunity to examine the value proposition of a UDC degree using a credible and consistent methodology. The Postsecondary Value Framework (PVF) provided a useful lens for structuring this analysis.

Analytical Approach

Using PSEO earnings data, ETEP conducted its first analysis of graduate earnings outcomes for UDC alumni. The team applied concepts from the Postsecondary Value Framework to assess whether graduates achieved a meaningful economic return from their education.

The analysis focused on PVF Threshold 0, Minimum Economic Return. Using net cost of attendance as the cost measure, the team examined whether UDC graduates earn enough to recoup the cost of their education and achieve earnings above those of individuals with only a high school diploma.

Applying the PVF structure provided several benefits. It allowed ETEP to ground its work in a nationally recognized methodology rather than creating a one-off local metric. It also provided a clear and structured way to communicate the findings to policymakers and the public.

Through the application of this methodology and this newly available data set, the District was able to examine real earnings outcomes for UDC graduates and estimate the long-term economic value of a bachelor's degree from the institution.

Implementation Process

The project was carried out as a collaboration between ETEP, UDC, and partners involved in the PSEO project. Access to PSEO data made it possible to examine earnings outcomes across state lines, addressing a longstanding challenge for a city whose graduates often work throughout the broader metropolitan region.

Throughout the process, close coordination between ETEP and UDC leadership ensured that the analysis reflected the institution's context and priorities. The findings were positioned as a tool for understanding graduate outcomes and UDC's role in preparing students for careers in the regional workforce.

ETEP's role in the analysis was primarily supportive rather than regulatory. The office does not oversee institutional policy or make program-level decisions. Instead, its goal was to provide reliable information that could help inform targeted conversations about education, workforce development, and economic mobility in the District.

Key Insights

The analysis demonstrated that a UDC bachelor's degree produces strong long-term economic returns. The results showed that graduates experience significantly higher lifetime earnings compared with individuals who enter the workforce with only a high school diploma.

Beyond the economic findings themselves, the project helped shift how the District talks about postsecondary outcomes. The ability to present credible earnings data strengthened the narrative that UDC plays a critical role in building the District's workforce and supporting upward mobility for residents.

At the same time, ETEP leaders emphasized that earnings metrics represent only one dimension of program value. Many degree programs that serve essential public functions, such as education, social work, and public service, may not lead to the highest earnings but remain vital to the health and functioning of the community. The analysis therefore serves as one component of a broader conversation about the contributions of higher education.

Looking Ahead

The District plans to build on this work in several ways. In 2026, UDC will begin contributing associate degree data to the PSEO project, enabling similar analyses of outcomes for students completing two-year programs.

ETEP is also exploring additional ways to use PSEO data to better understand employment outcomes for DC residents, including how graduates work both within and beyond the District's boundaries. These analyses will help inform future education and workforce strategies while strengthening the city's integrated data infrastructure.

Advice for Other States and Cities

The District's experience highlights the value of participating in national data collaborations. For jurisdictions with small geographic boundaries or highly mobile populations, national earnings datasets such as PSEO can provide insights that are difficult to obtain through local administrative data alone.

Equally important is the value of shared methodological guidance. Using a nationally recognized framework helped the District move quickly from data access to actionable insight while avoiding prolonged debates about methodology.

Participation in the PSEO Coalition provided both technical resources and a community of peers working on similar questions. For DC leaders, the combination of shared data, shared methodology, and collaborative learning significantly accelerated the ability to translate data into meaningful insight about postsecondary value.

Recommendations for Future PVF Implementation Community Work

The experiences of the PVF Implementation Community demonstrate that interest in measuring postsecondary value is widespread, but that successful implementation depends on sustained, differentiated support. Participants did not struggle to understand why postsecondary value matters; rather, they navigated recurring challenges related to data readiness, methodological decision-making, communication, and policy alignment.

Based on these shared experiences, four recommendations emerge as critical to scaling and sustaining the Postsecondary Value Framework across states, systems, and institutions.

1. Provide Deeper, Differentiated Technical Assistance

Across the community, participants consistently emphasized that general guidance was insufficient once implementation moved beyond conceptual understanding. Teams conducting analyses encountered highly contextual challenges – such as data source selection, cohort definition, benchmark construction, and interpretation of results – that required hands-on, peer-informed problem-solving.

Future PVF efforts should invest in differentiated technical assistance models, including:

- Analyst-to-analyst support for entities conducting or refining analyses
- Small-group consultations organized around shared challenges (e.g., border institutions, small programs, non-credit data)
- Clear documentation of implementation pathways reflecting different levels of readiness

This approach recognizes that implementation does not proceed at a uniform pace and that tailored support is essential for credibility and momentum.

2. Develop Practical Implementation Guidance Grounded in Real-World Decision Points

Participants repeatedly asked not just what metrics to use, but how peers made decisions under real constraints. Questions about threshold selection, benchmarking choices, handling data gaps, and sequencing work surfaced across action plans and presentations.

While the PVF provides a strong conceptual foundation, participants expressed a clear need for applied guidance that reflects lived implementation experience rather than idealized models.

The PSEO Coalition should produce practical implementation resources, including:

- A PVF Implementation Guidebook that documents common pathways, decision points, and tradeoffs
- State and system briefs illustrating how different entities adapted PVF concepts to their policy and data environments
- Readiness and scoping tools to help new participants determine appropriate starting points

In developing these resources, the PSEO Coalition will continue to collaborate with partners across the field, including organizations such as the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), to ensure that guidance and tools remain aligned with broader efforts to advance responsible measurement and communication of postsecondary value.

3. Expand Support for Communicating Postsecondary Value

Nearly every participant identified communication as a central implementation challenge. Even when analyses were technically sound, teams anticipated risks related to oversimplification, misinterpretation, or politicization, particularly in policy-facing contexts.

Participants who planned communication strategies alongside analysis (e.g., Iowa, New Jersey, Alabama) were better positioned to use results productively, while others expressed concern about releasing metrics without sufficient narrative framing.

Future PVF work should include intentional support for communication and narrative development, such as:

- Guidance on framing value metrics for different audiences (e.g., policymakers, institutional leaders, students, the public)
- Templates and exemplars for reports, dashboards, and briefing materials
- Opportunities for peer exchange focused specifically on communication challenges

This recognizes that building trust around postsecondary value requires more than publishing data; it requires context, explanation, and alignment with system, state, and institutional missions.

4. Align PVF Work with Federal and State Accountability Efforts

Participants consistently navigated a crowded accountability landscape that includes federal requirements, state statutes, and institutional reporting obligations. Where PVF-aligned work connected to these existing demands, it gained relevance and staying power. Where alignment was unclear, PVF work risked being perceived as additive rather than integrative.

The next phase of PVF implementation should prioritize explicit alignment with federal and state accountability frameworks, including:

- Mapping PVF thresholds and concepts to existing and emerging requirements
- Identifying opportunities to use PVF-aligned analyses to satisfy multiple reporting needs
- Coordinating with partners to reduce duplication and reinforce consistency
- Aligning PVF work with existing policy infrastructure to strengthen its relevance and increase the likelihood of sustained use.

Conclusion

The PVF Implementation Community demonstrates that operationalizing postsecondary value is not primarily a technical exercise, nor a question of framework adoption. Instead, it is a systematic process that requires clarity about purpose, disciplined methodological choices, and alignment with existing data, policy, and decision-making structures. Across diverse contexts, participants showed that progress often begins with building shared understanding, assessing readiness, and making deliberate choices about scope before producing public metrics. These early steps are not delays; they are essential foundations for responsible and credible use of postsecondary value measures.

The initiative also underscores why intermediary-led support matters. Participants benefited most when they had access to a trusted space for peer learning, analytic problem-solving, and sense-making across varied policy and data environments. The PSEO Coalition's role as a convener and capacity builder enabled participants to engage the PVF in ways that were appropriate to their context while remaining anchored in shared principles. This model of support helped prevent premature or misaligned analyses and elevated implementation decisions that might otherwise remain implicit or fragmented.

Looking ahead, the PSEO Coalition is well positioned to support the next phase of work on postsecondary value. Building on lessons learned from this initiative, the Coalition can deepen technical assistance, codify implementation pathways, strengthen communication capacity, and help align value measurement with federal and state accountability efforts. In doing so, it can continue to serve as an intermediary that translates national frameworks into practical, context-sensitive action, supporting members as they move from exploration to sustained use.

For states, systems, and institutional partners, this work offers a clear call to action. Advancing postsecondary value will require sustained investment in data infrastructure, analytic expertise, and governance processes, not just new metrics. It will require collaboration across agencies, alignment with existing policy priorities, and a commitment to transparency and equity in how outcomes are defined and communicated. By engaging in this work collectively, and by leveraging intermediary support, the field can move toward a more credible, nuanced, and equitable understanding of the value of postsecondary education.