

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## A Little Bit of Background

In 2019, Lumina Foundation supported two state partnerships' efforts in Alabama and Indiana in their effort to impact state-level postsecondary education using regional and local models. Lumina Foundation also engaged Equivolve Consulting to conduct a developmental evaluation to document the efforts in each state. The evaluation also offers examples of how the context in which a partnership operates, as well as the partnership-building process itself, can influence partnership structure/activities and stakeholder engagement.

The evaluation findings outlined in this report are intended to serve as a guide for: 1) states that may be beginning to build their postsecondary networks, or 2) states that are trying to expand postsecondary efforts and need to better understand how their state goals and contexts may be leveraged to create successful and sustainable systems.

## Some Important Context



### Who are the state partnerships and what were they working to achieve?

The **Alabama** partnership's primary actors include the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), Alabama Possible, and regional postsecondary leaders that support the Mobile Talent Hub. Their main effort has been focused on working to redefine narratives, demonstrate the importance of postsecondary credentials and facilitate access to them, and connect various state offices working on postsecondary issues. Their work focuses on the following outcomes:

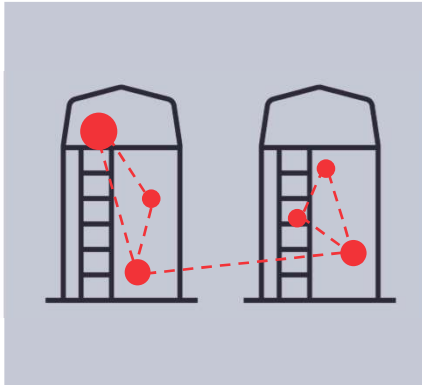
- Redefine the conversation around poor and working-class Americans to one of skills and knowledge
- Demonstrate the impact of postsecondary credentials, especially non-degree credentials, on alleviating poverty
- Reduce barriers to participation in postsecondary education by adults with no recognized training
- Connect state offices of education, workforce, and unemployment to regional and/or community-led partnerships

The **Indiana** partnership's primary actors include the Indiana Talent Network (ITN), Indiana's Office of Career Connects and Talent (CCT), and CivicLab. They came together to support the state-sponsored initiative, 21st Century Talent Regions (21CTR). Together, the partnership sought to scale affordable pathways and first credentials for adults. This has included work to redefine narratives, implement supports to help students with completion, reduce barriers to postsecondary credentials and demonstrate their impact on alleviating poverty, and improve postsecondary data. Their work focuses on the following outcomes:

- Implementing targeted academic, social, and financial supports to help students complete educational goals
- Reducing local, state, and federal barriers that prevent timely progression to credentials
- Redefining conversations around poor and working-class Americans to one of skills and knowledge
- Demonstrating the impact of postsecondary credentials on alleviating poverty and reducing barriers to participating in postsecondary education by adults with no recognized training
- Improving data across the postsecondary landscape and creating data systems for counting non-degree credentials

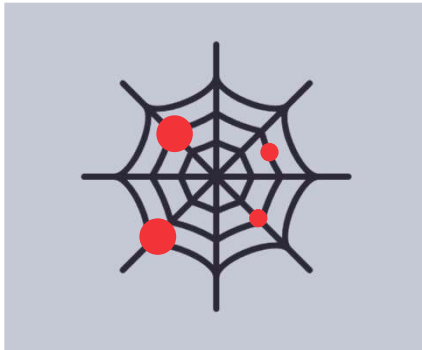


## How were the partnerships structured?



**Alabama's** statewide partnership structure is **siloed**.

Stakeholders in the state shared that there are individual regional partnerships across the state that may occasionally collaborate on initiatives or partner with one another to meet any similar needs of their populations. More often, however, they compete for the limited resources available. Regional partnerships are distinct from a larger statewide partnership of organizations and entities that focus on statewide goals rather than the specific needs of individual regions.



**Indiana's** statewide partnership structure is a **web** that continues to connect state and regional stakeholders consistently. Indiana Talent Network (ITN) members include stakeholders working to address postsecondary education needs across the state, such as Ivy Technical Community College and government agencies, as well as regional stakeholders, which include 21<sup>st</sup> Century Talent Region (21CTR) backbone organizations and other community partners.

## 7 Lessons From Alabama & Indiana If You're Also Building or Maintaining a Postsecondary Statewide Partnership

1

There are distinct roles that have contributed or could contribute to partnership success for Alabama and Indiana: Connector, Connected State Partner, Equity Champion, Technical Assistance Provider, and Funder.

### Partnership Roles

The **Connector** works to keep stakeholders connected to networks and other resources.

The **Connected State Partner** helps keep regions and other state partners on the same page.

The **Equity Champion** serves as a thought partner on how to better incorporate equity into partnership work.

### Support Roles

The **Technical Assistance Provider** offers guidance and support where regional and state partners need it the most.

The **Funder** makes sure that resources are accessible to stakeholders.

**2**

Organizational supports help regional organizations continue to push work forward despite potential barriers. The Connector role also aids in building the capacity of organizations to conduct work and in trust-building among involved stakeholders.

**3**

Stakeholder resilience and commitment to a shared goal allow for work to be successful. In both Alabama and Indiana, stakeholders shared that at the center of their partnership success is the dedication that partners have to improving postsecondary education in their states.

**4**

Geographic and cultural barriers can prevent collaboration and continued partnership. The physical size of the state limits interactions between stakeholders from different regions. In addition, the location of larger or more involved organizations and government offices can shift perceived power to one geographic location, leaving other parts of the states disconnected.

**5**

When funding or grants cannot be used to help stakeholders cover the cost of engaging in partnership activities, smaller organizations can be prevented from engaging with partnerships or communicating with other stakeholders who may be trying to address similar issues around postsecondary attainment.

**6**

A lack of shared language and a system-building approach hindered cross-sector and regional collaboration, especially when trying to connect stakeholders from different systems and industries. Developing a shared language and systematic approach to addressing postsecondary goals is crucial for fostering partnership, establishing shared goals, and consistently engaging stakeholders.

**7**

Shared decision-making is an important aspect of both partnerships, but sometimes the structure of the partnership hinders this from happening. Though unintentional, the Connector role may sometimes present challenges for making shared decisions. Concentrated decision-making among the Connectors is a consequence of having a team member whose role is both important for building relationships between regional and state stakeholders, and for establishing postsecondary priorities.

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“People with power . . . will sometimes surface-level engage the people who are directly impacted, and I find that it's often in a placating or an appeasing way, like they try to say, ‘Hey, we are listening to you,’ but substantially they're not listening. And my fear is that . . . the people with the real decision-making power are drafting policies and not taking seriously the feedback that they're getting from the people being impacted, and then in the implementation stage, the people who are being directly impacted are overburdened, overwhelmed, don't have any support or investment.” — ALABAMA STAKEHOLDER

## Recommendations for Other Postsecondary Statewide Partnerships

Lessons from the Alabama and Indiana partnership efforts can provide insight into potential challenges and solutions for other states across the country that are working on advancing postsecondary attainment through regional partnerships. Below, we provide recommendations for states seeking to embark on similar work, gleaned both from advice provided directly from the Alabama and Indiana backbone teams, as well as our observations of their work.



### **“Don’t drag your feet forever.”**

While the work of improving postsecondary attainment for all residents of a state can seem overbearing or insurmountable, several members of the state partnerships emphasized the importance of just getting started. Planning is important, but partnerships should not get stuck here.



### **Let data be your “flashlight.”**

Data on postsecondary education, credentialing, and employment are helpful when developing plans, gaining buy-in from new stakeholders — especially those who may not immediately see the value of implementing a statewide postsecondary attainment strategy, and deciding on any changes to the focus of the work.



### **“Leverage your relationship builders and your networkers.”**

Including someone in the partnership who has extensive historical knowledge of postsecondary work in the state will be important for states seeking to conduct similar work as Alabama and Indiana. These team members usually have established an extensive number of relationships across the state and are aware of work that has been tried in various regions, as well as statewide initiatives that have been implemented.



### **Build it, and the state will come.**

In cases where the relationships between regions and state do not exist or where there are no state-level postsecondary champions or leadership, it should not be a deterrent to building or strengthening the postsecondary ecosystem. This was also the case for both Alabama and Indiana at some point in their work, but it was important that the partnerships were prepared once the state priorities aligned with partnership priorities.



### **Listen to and center community voices.**

Developing postsecondary attainment strategies that are informed by those who will be directly affected by them helps to ensure that those strategies align with current needs and build on community assets.