



Aligning Policies and Practices

A Case Study about Houston City College

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HOUSTON
CITY COLLEGE

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Formed in 2014, Workcred is an affiliate of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). Its mission is to strengthen workforce quality by improving the credentialing system, ensuring its ongoing relevance, and preparing employers, workers, educators, and governments to use it effectively. Workcred's vision is a labor market that relies on the relevance, quality, and value of workforce credentials for opportunities, growth, and development.

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About the Project

Higher education policy is placing greater emphasis on the types of outcomes students achieve after graduation from an institution of higher education. These outcomes may include obtaining a job with a family-sustaining wage, workforce readiness, or earning an industry credential that validates that a learner has a marketable skill. To meet these outcomes, there must be intentional and committed alignment of policies that guide the development and awarding of credentials, allowing learners to successfully transition into the workforce or continue their education.

Workcred partnered with Houston City College (HCC) to examine how it is aligning policies to better support learners to complete industry certification + certificate/degree pathways, earn postsecondary credentials of value, and enter the workforce.¹ The passage of House Bill 8 (HB 8) and other updates to policy in Texas has resulted in a substantial change in how community colleges are funded. This case study provides examples of the institutional policies and processes that HCC developed or refined, and how they were implemented to align with these changes in policy for Texas.

Texas Policy Background

Texas higher education institutions play a pivotal role in increasing the postsecondary educational attainment of Texans and ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the skills to power the state economy.² The 2015-2030 Texas higher education strategic plan, 60x30TX, outlined four broad goals for higher education institutions around increasing postsecondary education completion, ensuring all postsecondary graduates earn a marketable skill, and reducing student debt to either zero or a manageable level.³ Specifically, these goals state that by 2030:

- » At least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 will have a certificate or degree.
- » At least 550,000 students will complete a certificate, associate, bachelor's, or master's program from an institution of higher education in Texas.
- » All graduates from Texas public institutions of higher education will have completed programs with identified marketable skills.
- » Undergraduate student loan debt will not exceed 60 percent of first-year wages for graduates of Texas public institutions.

The primary funding to support these education goals comes from HB 8, which was passed in 2023. Prior to HB 8, Texas community colleges were funded based on a static model that focused on student enrollment and contact hours. HB 8 fundamentally changed the finance model to an outcomes-based system that relies on measurable student success and labor market needs.⁴ The outcomes-based funding model is the largest source of the state allocation for community colleges and provides funding based on three outcomes:

- » The number of high school students who complete 15 semester credit hours in dual credit or dual enrollment courses in an approved career pathway;
- » The number of community college students who earn credentials of value as defined by Texas, which offer purpose in the economy, value in the labor market, and opportunities for good jobs and meaningful careers; and
- » The number of community college students who transfer successfully to public four-year universities or complete 15 semester credit hours in a structured co-enrollment program.

Beyond the base funding, HB 8 also provides additional financial resources to community colleges by weighting the funding formula for these outcomes to incentivize the success of historically underserved populations, which include economically disadvantaged students (e.g., federal Pell Grant recipients), academically disadvantaged students, and adult learners age 25 and over.⁵ In addition, community colleges receive additional funding for credentials that are aligned with high-demand occupations in either the state or the region served by the community college.

In 2025, Senate Bill 1786 was signed into law and amended and clarified sections of HB 8. The definition of credential of value was expanded to include degrees, certificates, and other credentials. Also, for a credential to be classified as a credential of value, the economic benefits of the credential must exceed the cost of the education, result in a well-paying job by providing the credential holder with a sustainable wage, and lead to economic mobility.⁶ The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) was also authorized to designate a credential as a credential of value if it addresses a critical and high-demand workforce need, even though it does not meet the other criteria required for a credential of value.⁷ In addition, the metric focusing on learners transferring from community colleges was expanded to include both Texas public and private higher education institutions. The goals in the 60x30TX strategic plan were also expanded to focus on the entire working age population of Texans by adding that 60 percent of Texans for both age groups of 25-34 and 35-64 will earn a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary credential of value.

HB 8 Policy Implications at HCC

HB 8 is transforming community college funding by making financial sustainability directly contingent on student outcomes. This requires community colleges, such as HCC, to implement new processes to ensure that their programs and awards (e.g., associate degree, institutional credential leading to licensure or certification (ICLC), certificate) are both student-success focused and meeting the regional labor market served by the community college.

HCC strategically responded to this legislative mandate by optimizing its workforce programs. Implementation of HB 8 at HCC was led by the Research, Analytics, and Decision Support department, with critical guidance from the Workforce Program Research Development (WPRD) department. The departments began by developing processes that could be used by all 63 workforce programs to ensure that the curriculum was aligned with

regional workforce needs, that all awards meet the definition of a credential of value, and that programs within each discipline can be stacked and lead to additional credentials of value or pathways into the workforce. In addition, the processes were focused on making financially-prudent decisions, while simultaneously maintaining a focus on student success. The following sections highlight the processes that HCC developed or refined and how they were implemented within workforce programs.

Better Utilize Advisory Committees

Advisory committees have the ability to provide critical information about the skills, credentials, and equipment/software that is necessary for individuals to succeed in the labor market, as well to provide information about industry and employment trends. However, not all workforce programs have engaged their advisory committee members in the same way or around the same topics. Based on guidelines from THECB,⁸ WPRD staff developed a presentation for use with the advisory committees to create a baseline of activities they should all be focused on to directly support the best ways for programs to be created and revised. These activities include:

- » Assessing the goals and objectives of program curricula
- » Identifying competencies for the occupations associated with each program
- » Suggesting revisions for the program
- » Determining if the program has access to necessary equipment, technology, and facilities
- » Providing guidance about new equipment and/or software that may be needed for a program

For advisory committees to support alignment of programs to meet regional workforce needs, committees are encouraged to develop meetings that focus on specific and actionable items, such as:

- » Review and provide input about labor market information (LMI) gathered from both public and private sources and discuss whether there is agreement or areas of discrepancy
- » Provide information about current and forecasted industry trends
- » Discuss current and forecasted employment trends, including which occupations are growing and which are declining
- » Identify the most critical employability and technical skills/competencies that are required for job candidates to succeed in the workforce
- » Identify industry-developed credentials (e.g., certificates or certifications) that employers prefer or require for employment
- » Review the program curriculum to provide insights about whether the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are being taught and assessed are aligned with the KSAs that employers value (and if there are gaps, discuss how those gaps can be filled)

Develop and Implement a Curriculum Alignment Process

HCC also developed a process to guide the current and future alignment of workforce program curricula with local and regional labor market needs.⁹ Each of these steps is geared toward ensuring that HCC students earn credentials of value.

Review Current Awards and Enrollments

This process begins by identifying what programs and awards are currently being offered. Each discipline has different combinations of credit and non-credit programs and awards, which may include an associate degree, level one and two certificates, advanced technical certificates, continuing education certificates, occupational skill awards, and/or ICLCs. Faculty and the advisory committee review the enrollment in each of these programs and awards to better understand the number of students being prepared for specific occupations.

Program faculty then work with WPRD staff to review LMI to gain insights about growing and waning occupations, earnings, in-demand skills and occupations, future demand for specific occupations, lists of third-party credentials included in job postings, etc. This information is critical in helping to inform the decisions about whether the program is meeting the current labor market need and to understand if the program is appropriately positioned to address future labor market needs.

Identify the Skills

Program faculty and advisory committee members work together to identify the technical and employability skills, competencies, and attributes that are required to successfully enter the occupations for which the programs are focused. This information may be gathered from multiple sources including, advisory committee members, program alumni who are in the workforce, a LMI analysis, a developing a curriculum (DACUM) process, and/or publicly available information from certification bodies and industry associations.

Verify the Skills with Industry Standards

Once the competencies are identified, the information is reviewed by employer partners, advisory committee members, faculty, and alumni to ensure that the competencies accurately reflect the regional workforce skill needs.

Complete a Curriculum Alignment Map

HCC uses a curriculum alignment mapping process to review existing programs and awards, and to develop new ones, by aligning the learning outcomes or critical work functions with all of the instructional courses that are part of the program or award. Information about skills, learning objectives, and key workforce activities is used to populate the map. Faculty may also choose to work with curriculum specialists to develop the map.

Identify Where and When the Skills are Taught

Program faculty use the curriculum alignment map to identify where each skill is taught in each course. This includes identifying whether the skill is introduced, reinforced (e.g., skills is explicitly taught or practiced), or mastered. The curriculum map can also be used to identify in which course the skill is assessed.

Identify Overlap and Gaps

The curriculum map is also used by faculty and advisory committee members to understand gaps and redundancies in the curriculum. The map provides information about where skills should be reinforced or where more reinforcement is required. This helps faculty determine the proper sequence of courses, which is important so that skills build upon each other as students move from course to course or program to program through a pathway.

Conduct a Crosswalk

Program faculty also conduct a crosswalk of the courses and awards in a program to see if there are any duplications and map how each entry- and exit-point along the pathway allows students to seamlessly transition from one award to another. During this process, all required and elective course options are matched to the relevant award. If a program or award does not align with labor market demand or other awards in the pathway, then that may require a discussion about whether that program or award should be maintained or deactivated.

Final Review and Implementation

After the alignment mapping process is completed, a final review is conducted with faculty, the advisory committee, and other employers that are engaged with the program to provide any further feedback before the program or award is submitted for any necessary final approvals by HCC and THECB. Since this process is not a one-time event, HCC requires it to be repeated for each workforce program at a minimum of every two years to ensure that the pathways and credentials of value continue to be aligned with regional labor market demand. And if there have been substantial changes in skill requirements, new legislative mandates, or employers have changed which third-party credentials (e.g., certifications) they use and value, then the alignment process may need to occur earlier than the two-year review schedule.

Design ICLCs for Workforce Programs

ICLCs are non-credit or for-credit short-term credentials designed for students seeking to gain in-demand technical skills that must lead to an industry-recognized certification or license. An ICLC in a standard field must include at least 144 contact hours or 9 semester credit hours, and in a high-demand field the ICLC must have at least 80 contact hours or 5 semester credit hours.¹⁰ The contact hours reflect the actual number of hours a student is engaged in organized instructional activity. All ICLCs must be approved by the relevant HCC industry advisory committee before it is added to THECB program inventory and conferred on a student's transcript.

In addition, ICLCs align with the HB 8 outcomes-based funding model goal to support stackable, industry-aligned pathways and prepare students for licensure or certification. And, as long as the ICLC is designed accordingly, it qualifies for state funding under HB 8. However, it is important to note that the student must earn the ICLC, not just the industry certification or license, for the ICLC to qualify for funding under HB 8.

The WPRD department led efforts to create ICLCs for credit and non-credit continuing education courses by emphasizing the value of faculty training. This step is a critical component to effectively implement ICLCs and align curriculum with new industry standards, state policy requirements, and ensure quality instruction. WPRD staff created webinars and trainings for program faculty to provide guidance on the process of creating ICLCs.

One of the training sessions outlined three different approaches that could be considered when designing an ICLC, including when an ICLC should be continuing-education-based, semester-based where the ICLC is embedded in a credit pathway, or a continuing-education-mirrored course of a semester-based ICLC. One critical component of this work is that HCC required collaboration, including a shared governance structure, between continuing education and for-credit programs.

WPRD staff also work with faculty to identify workforce programs where industry credentials are already embedded. Faculty then submit courses that would provide the necessary educational prerequisites for ICLC completers to meet the eligibility requirements to take the industry certification or licensure exams. This effort resulted in the creation of 24 for-credit ICLCs and 21 non-credit continuing education ICLCs in business technology, construction trades, healthcare, information technology, filmmaking, logistics and global supply chain management, and drafting and design engineering technology. The WPRD department continues to work with workforce programs that have industry credentials embedded in their programs, but have not yet created and submitted any ICLCs for approval.

Impact of HB 8 on HCC's Interior Design Pathway

HCC's interior design pathway provides some additional examples of how the implementation of HB 8 has led to policy and procedural changes in the program to ensure alignment with HB 8's new performance-based funding model.

Developing an ICLC

Interior design students have an opportunity to earn the Autodesk Certified User (ACU) in AutoCAD certification which is embedded in the pathway through an ICLC. ACU is an entry-level certification that assesses an individual's competence in basic drafting and design techniques using AutoCAD software, which is commonly used by interior designers. WPRD staff worked with the interior design faculty to develop this ICLC that meets THECB requirements for a standard program based on CIP codes. The ACU ICLC consists of the following three courses, each worth three credits:

- » INDS 1311: Fundamentals of Interior Design
- » INDS 1319: Technical Drawing for Interior Designers
- » INDS 2305: Interior Design Graphics

The employers, through the advisory committee, validated that the ACU certification encompasses a crucial, high-demand technical skill required by the labor market. The interior design advisory committee formally approved the implementation of the ACU ICLC in spring of 2025. HCC then secured state approval for the ACU ICLC from THECB, which documents that the ICLC meets the minimum contact hour threshold and qualifies for the high-value performance funding through HB 8. Students at HCC who earn the ACU ICLC receive an ICLC designation on their transcript.

Realigning Courses and Creating a Stackable Pathway

In addition to an associate of applied science degree (AAS) and the ACU ICLC, the interior design pathway also includes two certificate programs—a level 1 certificate for interior decorating and a level 2 certificate for kitchen and bath design professionals. Students can begin their academic journey by earning the ICLC, progress to the level 1 certificate, followed by the level 2 certificate, and culminate in the AAS degree. All but one of the courses for the level 1 certificate count toward the AAS degree, while the level 2 certificate is a specialty program that has some course overlap with the degree curriculum, but also adds additional and specific skills needed for kitchen and bath design work. As part of the curriculum alignment process, the advisory committee provided guidance about how to restack the level 1 and 2 certificate courses to better align with the AAS degree and the transfer pathway to Stephen F. Austin University (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Crosswalk of HCC's Interior Design Pathway

COURSES	<div> <div></div> PREREQUISITE <div></div> REQUIRED COURSE </div>		INTERIOR DESIGN AAS	INTERIOR DECORATING LEVEL 1 CERTIFICATE	KITCHEN AND BATH DESIGN PROFESSIONAL LEVEL 2 CERTIFICATE	ACU IN AUTOCAD ICLC
EDUC 1300: Learning Framework			●		●	
General Education Elective (3 credits)			●			
INDS 1311: Fundamentals of Interior Design			●	●	●	●
INDS 1301: Basic Elements of Design			●	●		
INDS 1319: Technical Drawing for Interior Designers			●	●	●	●
INDS 1370: History of Interiors			●			
INDS 2321: Presentation Drawing			●		●	
INDS 1349: Fundamentals of Space Planning			●			
INDS 2307: Textiles for Interior Design			●	●		
INDS 2305: Interior Design Graphics			●		●	●
INDS 2317: Rendering Techniques			●		●	
ARTS 1303: Art History I (Prehistoric to the 14th Century)			●			
Math/Natural Science Elective (3 credits)			●			
INDS 2313: Residential Design I			●			
INDS 1315: Materials, Methods and Estimating			●	●	●	
INDS 2271: Digital Presentation Methods			●			
INDS 1345: Commercial Design I			●			
ARTS 1304: Art History II (14 th Century to the Present)			●			
INDS 2325: Professional Practices for Interior Designers			●	●	●	
INDS 2237: Portfolio Presentation			●			
INDS 2264: Practicum (or Field Experience) Interior Design			●			
ELPT 1315: Electrical Calculations I				●		
INDS 2310: Kitchen and Bath Design					●	
INDS 2370: Digital Presentation Methods					●	
INDS 2330: Interior Design Building Systems					●	
INDS 1341: Color Theory and Application					●	
INDS 2315: Lighting for Interior Designers					●	
INDS 2371: Advanced Kitchen and Bath Design					●	
INDS 2386: Internship in Interior Design					●	
Total Credits			60	21	45	9

As Figure 2 shows, the interior design programs offer a stackable pathway to ensure that students can earn multiple credentials on their path to a degree, allowing HCC to receive performance funding for each credential achieved by the student. In the fall of 2026, a new level 1 certificate in business management for interior designers will be offered as a collaboration between the interior design, accounting, and business programs. The certificate is aimed at students or current interior designers interested in starting their own business.

Figure 2: Interior Design Career Pathway Map



Opportunity to Transfer to a Four-year Degree Program

The HCC interior design program has a dedicated transfer agreement with Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) known as the SFA Fast Track. This partnership allows HCC students to earn a bachelor's degree in interior design, while remaining in the Houston area. Students can choose to attend classes either online or by attending in-person classes that are taught on the HCC Central Campus. Students who complete their bachelor's degree and want to become a registered interior designer in Texas can take the Council for Interior Design Qualification's exam and apply for a license through the Texas Board of Architectural Examiners.

Strengthening Sustainability

HCC also strengthens its financial sustainability by integrating the HB 8 performance metrics and other Texas policy guidelines into the interior design pathway. These new policies transform the support of historically underserved students into a direct financial imperative by maximizing the college's potential revenue through additional weighting in the funding model—25 percent for academically and economically disadvantaged students and 50 percent for adult students—when these students meet the metrics. For example, as of fall 2025, 171 HCC students are enrolled in the SFA Fast Track, which meets the HB 8 metric on successfully transferring to a Texas four-year university. In addition, 89 of those SFA Fast Track students were federal Pell grant recipients for the 2024-25 academic year compared to the 82 students who were not. And, the strong presence of students in the 25-39 age bracket also ensures that HCC capitalizes on the additional funding for serving adult learners.¹¹

Another key metric for HB 8 performance funding is the focus on dual-credit completion. The interior design department has dual-credit relationships with multiple high schools in the Houston area. In the fall of 2025, 35 high school students were dually-enrolled in courses that count toward the level 1 interior design certificate at HCC. Even though 21 credit hours are required to earn the certificate, HCC meets the HB 8 metric on dual enrollment once students complete 15 credit hours.

Through data-driven advising strategies, an articulated, industry-informed curriculum alignment process, faculty training, and strong partnerships with high schools and four-year higher education institutions, HCC is successfully fulfilling the state's dual mandate through HB 8: increase educational attainment for Texas students while directly meeting critical regional workforce demands through performance metrics.



Endnotes

- 1 Author's note: You can find the recommendations and lessons learned from the project here: *Recommendations to Align Policies to Support Career Pathways that Include Industry Credentials*, (Workcred, December 2025): <https://share.ansi.org/wc/Shared%20Documents/Workcred-Reports/Community-College-Pathways/Recommendations-to-Align-Policies-to-Support-Career-Pathways.pdf>.
- 2 "Formula Funding," Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://www.highered.texas.gov/community-college-finance/formula-funding/>.
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- 6 "Texas Senate Bill 1786," Section 7, LegiScan, accessed November 25, 2025, <https://legiscan.com/TX/text/SB1786/id/3235979/Texas-2025-SB1786-Enrolled.html>.
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- 8 "Chapter 6 – Guidance Resources, Section B – Advisory Committee with Business and Industry," *Career and Technical Education Guidelines* (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, April 2025), <https://reportcenter.highered.texas.gov/agency-publication/guidelines-manuals/career-and-technical-education-guidelines>.
- 9 "Curriculum Alignment Process," Houston City College, email to author, November 16, 2025.
- 10 "Community College Finance Frequently Asked Questions," Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.highered.texas.gov/community-college-finance/community-college-finance-faqs/>.
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