SOUTHWEST
TENNESSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Pathways to Prosperity: Strategic Reform 3.0

A White Paper

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Strategic Reform Alignment Report | Executive Summary

This white paper presents a comprehensive overview of the strategic reform framework guiding Southwest Tennessee Community College's transformation through 2030. It outlines the institution's dual priorities—strengthening workforce programs and increasing bachelor's degree transfers—and introduces the high-impact initiatives designed to bring these priorities to life. A detailed breakdown of reform strategies, committee leadership, implementation infrastructure, alignment frameworks, timelines, and evaluation protocols reinforce Southwest's deep and ongoing commitment to student success and regional advancement.

Southwest's agenda reflects not only the Aspen Community College 3.0 framework, but also a broader evolution across the national community college field. Over the past two decades, organizations such as Achieving the Dream (ATD), the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have helped shape a shared understanding of the community college mission through three distinct but connected phases:

- **1.0: Access** – The initial focus was on expanding enrollment and opening doors to higher education for all students, particularly those from historically underserved populations.
- **2.0: Retention and Completion** – As access improved, the national conversation shifted toward helping students stay enrolled, complete credentials, and graduate with meaningful outcomes.
- **3.0: Post-College Success** – Today's reform era prioritizes what happens *after* graduation: ensuring students achieve gainful employment, transfer to four-year universities, and experience long-term economic and social mobility.

At Southwest, this evolution is more than theoretical—it defines our strategic direction and reflects our deep belief in the enduring value of higher education—not just as a means of enrollment or credentialing, but as a pathway to meaningful careers, community impact, and generational opportunity. Pathways to Prosperity: Reform 3.0 challenges us to align every policy, program, and partnership with the ultimate outcome: that our students leave Southwest with the skills, knowledge, and momentum to thrive in the real world.

Launched in 2025, **Pathways to Prosperity: Reform 3.0** (or Reform 3.0) is a bold blueprint rooted in the conviction that student success and regional prosperity are inseparable. At its core lies a focused reform agenda aimed at expanding educational access, strengthening workforce readiness, and promoting upward mobility across Memphis and the Mid-South.

Our Why: Demographic Context and Institutional Imperative

Southwest Tennessee Community College's *Reform 3.0* initiative is rooted in the realities of the region we serve—and in our responsibility to confront them with clarity and courage.

Memphis, Tennessee—a majority-Black city of approximately 633,000—faces persistent economic disparities. With a median household income of $51,400 and a poverty rate of 22.6% (including over one-third of children), Memphis continues to lag behind national economic benchmarks in income, health, and educational attainment. Only 25% of adults in the city hold a bachelor's degree, limiting access to high-wage, growth-oriented careers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023; City Health Dashboard, 2024).

Compounding these challenges is a mismatch between educational attainment and labor market demand: just 11% of jobs in the Memphis region require a bachelor's degree, reflecting the predominance of low-wage, low-skill employment sectors in the local economy (JobsEQ, 2024). In other words, too many jobs do not require a degree—and too few degrees lead to good jobs. This is both an economic challenge and a barrier to upward mobility.

Yet even amid this disconnect, our dual reform priorities remain essential:

- **Workforce Pathways** offer direct access to high-demand, middle-skill jobs that provide family-sustaining wages. By expanding these pathways and phasing out low-return programs, we aim to increase access to upward mobility for historically underserved populations—including working adults, first-generation college students, and communities of color.
- **Transfer Pathways** create long-term opportunity. Although few jobs currently require a bachelor's degree, those that do offer significantly higher lifetime earnings and career growth—especially in fields like education, healthcare, and business. Expanding access to these pathways is critical to our region's economic resilience.

In short, our reform agenda addresses both the urgent needs of the present labor market and the structural changes necessary to build a more upwardly mobile economy for Memphis and the Mid-South. At Southwest, we believe that education must lead somewhere—and we are committed to ensuring that every credential we offer moves our students toward prosperity.

Southwest's Definition of Student Success under Reform 3.0

At Southwest Tennessee Community College, student success is defined not solely by enrollment or course completion, but by what happens after students leave us. Guided by the national Reform 3.0 model, we measure success by our ability to prepare students for post-graduate achievement, whether through meaningful employment in high-demand fields, successful transfer and completion of a bachelor's degree, or advancement into family-sustaining careers.

Student success means that every credential earned leads to real economic opportunity, long-term mobility, and the power to transform lives and communities across Memphis and the Mid-South.

Strategic Reform 3.0 Priorities

Our reform agenda is anchored in two ambitious and student-centered priorities:

- **Strengthening Workforce Programs**
  We define labor market outcomes as a central component of student success. This requires understanding the dynamics of the regional labor market and aligning academic offerings with the needs of both employers and our population.
- **Increasing Transfer to bachelor's Degrees**
  We prioritize transfer at the executive level to ensure sustainable, scaled success. This includes aligning program paths; supporting high-quality instruction to support bachelor's completion, enhancing advising and supports, and expanding intentional course-taking for dual enrollment students.

These priorities are informed by the Aspen Institute's *Excellence Playbooks* and shaped by internal student success data, labor market needs, and the lived experiences of our community.

High-Impact Reform 3.0 Initiatives and Intended Outcomes

To bring these priorities to life, we are implementing a set of high-impact initiatives that reflect national best practices and address local needs:

- **Embedded Certificates and Navigation into High-Value Career Pathways**
- **Meta-Major Onboarding & Career Advising**
- **Dual Enrollment and CTE-Aligned Exposure**
- **Articulation Agreements and Reverse Transfer**

Each initiative supports both workforce readiness and transfer success—the twin pillars of our reform agenda—and aims to produce the following outcomes:

- **Higher rates of employment in aligned fields, increased earnings, and continued education beyond the associate level**
- **Greater alignment between educational pathways and workforce needs, leading to improved job placement, career satisfaction, and transfer into high-value bachelor's degree programs**
- **Increased credential completion (certificates, associate, and bachelor's degrees), improved career outcomes, and greater long-term economic mobility**
- **Increased associate and bachelor's degree attainment, reduced time-to-degree, and stronger completion outcomes for transfer students**

Aspen Institute Logic Model

(If the college…) Reform Action	(Students will…) Predicted Student Behavior & Outcomes	(Which will result in…) Ultimate Post-Completion Outcome
Offers embedded certificates within associate degree pathways	Earn stackable credentials earlier in their academic journey, gaining confidence, career readiness, and momentum, while improving key progression metrics	Higher rates of employment in aligned fields, increased earnings, and continued education beyond the associate level
Streamlines and enhances our meta-major onboarding process and integrates structured career advising and career-specific experiences	Identify a clear program of study early, follow a guided course sequence, participate in career-aligned experiences, and engage in long-term academic and career planning	Greater alignment between educational pathways and workforce needs, leading to improved job placement, career satisfaction, and transfer into high-value bachelor's degree programs
Expands and aligns dual enrollment and pre-college opportunities with career and technical education pathways	View dual enrollment as a purposeful entry into a career-aligned college pathway, enabling earlier credential attainment and better preparation for postsecondary success	Increased credential completion (certificates, associate, and bachelor's degrees), improved career outcomes, and greater long-term economic mobility
Implements articulation agreements and reverse transfer pathways with university and technical college partners	Experience seamless transfer with fewer lost credits, access reverse transfer opportunities to earn associate degrees while pursuing bachelor's programs	Increased associate and bachelor's degree attainment, reduced time-to-degree, and stronger completion outcomes for transfer students

From Reform Vision to Strategic Execution

To ensure alignment and coherence across all levels of the college, Southwest uses the following Strategic Focus and Altitude Framework:

Altitude	Element	Description	Roles Involved
30,000 ft.	Reform Agenda	Institutional Priorities	President, Executive Team
20,000 ft.	High-Impact Initiatives	Aspen-aligned reform strategies	Senior Leaders, Directors
5,000 ft.	Implementation Teams	Cross-functional execution units	Committee Chairs, Faculty, Staff
1,000 ft.	Strategic Plan	5-year roadmap with metrics	Planning Council, Governance
0 ft.	Faculty & Staff Execution	Day-to-day student interaction	Advisors, Instructors, Support Teams

From–To Transformational Vision: By 2030, Southwest will transform:

From...	To...
Disconnected short-term certificates	Embedded, stackable pathways
Late program selection	Early meta-major declaration
Meandering course-taking	Guided academic maps
Dual enrollment as credit accumulation	Purposeful, pathway-aligned DE
Limited employer partnerships	Co-created curriculum and pipelines
Inconsistent transfer outcomes	Seamless articulation and tracking
Achievement Gaps	Improved outcomes for underserved students
Reform silos	Institution-wide engagement
Success = Enrollment and Retention	Success = post-graduate economic mobility

Implementation and Accountability Infrastructure

- Executive Steering Committee (President + Senior Staff)
  Provides strategic oversight and ensures institution-wide alignment.
- Project Leadership (Director of Strategic Initiatives, by August 2025)
  Coordinates day-to-day execution, fosters cross-campus collaboration, and monitors progress.
- Subcommittees (Each with Co-Chairs and Cross-Functional Teams):
- Embedded Certificates and Navigation into High-Value Career Pathways
- Meta-Major Onboarding & Career Advising
- Dual Enrollment and CTE-Aligned Exposure
- Articulation Agreements and Reverse Transfer
- Data, Technology, and Evaluation

Each team tracks progress, utilizes performance dashboards, and contributes to continuous improvement.

Reform as the Foundation of Strategic Plan 2030

The Reform Agenda is not an add-on; it is the organizing Framework of Strategic Plan 2030. Reform 3.0 priorities cascade from vision to action:

- From institutional goals (30,000 ft) to staff-level execution (0 ft)
- From national frameworks to local results
- From conceptual priorities to measurable outcomes

Review, Assessment & Presidential Metrics

Review Cadence

- Monthly: Executive & Implementation Team Meetings
- Quarterly: Governance Council Reviews
- Annually: Strategic Plan Jamborees
- Midpoint (2027): Recalibration
- Final (2030): Community Impact Report

Top 6 Presidential Post-Graduate Metrics (See Appendix E)

1. Enrollment in high-opportunity programs
2. Credential completion (all pathways)
3. Graduate employment outcomes
4. Living-wage attainment
5. Transfer rates to bachelor's programs.
6. BA completion post-transfer

Conclusion: Aligning Education with Economic Opportunity

Southwest Tennessee Community College will launch *Pathways to Prosperity: Reform 3.0* as a bold, future-focused blueprint for institutional transformation. This initiative will build on nearly a decade of progress in expanding access (1.0) and improving retention and completion (2.0) by shifting the focus to post-graduate success. Reform 3.0 will aim to ensure that every credential earned at Southwest leads to something greater—whether a high-value career, successful transfer, or long-term economic mobility. To achieve this, the college will restructure programs, clarify pathways, deepen advising, and prioritize employer-aligned credentials—all designed to increase the value of a Southwest education in the eyes of both students and the labor market.

But institutional reform alone cannot shift regional outcomes.

While Southwest is focused on preparing students for post-graduate success in high-value careers, without a strong and growing base of local, family-sustaining employment, the region faces a real risk of talent outmigration—graduates gaining skills and credentials, only to leave Memphis and the region for opportunities elsewhere. In this way, even successful educational outcomes can contribute to brain drain if not matched by economic development (Jobs for the Future, 2023).

This challenge is closely tied to the region's continued reliance on low-wage jobs that often offer limited advancement and do not support long-term economic security. These jobs, while critical to many sectors—do not align with the aspirations of students pursuing credentials and degrees designed to lead to career mobility. Strengthening the connection between postsecondary attainment and the local economy will be key to ensuring that students can both build their futures and build them in Memphis.

Addressing this gap is not the responsibility of colleges alone.

Economic development organizations—including the Greater Memphis Chamber, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and local workforce boards—have a key role in attracting and expanding high-opportunity industries. Recent announcements such as Ford's BlueOval City in West Tennessee represent major investments in advanced manufacturing, mobility, and clean technology that could reshape the regional labor market (TNECD, 2023).

Memphis is also positioned to grow as a center of innovation. The University of Memphis's designation as a Carnegie R1 research institution reflects the region's potential to support graduate-level research, entrepreneurship, and talent retention. In healthcare, Memphis houses renowned institutions such as St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Methodist Le Bonheur, and Regional One Health, which anchor a robust healthcare ecosystem. This network is further strengthened by Baptist Memorial Health Care, one of the nation's largest nonprofit hospital systems, and the University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC), which drives graduate medical education and biomedical research in partnership with hospitals across the region. Together with the Memphis VA Medical Center, these institutions position Memphis to expand its biomedical and health sciences footprint and compete nationally as a hub for health innovation.

Pathways to Prosperity: Reform 3.0 is Southwest's institutional strategy for aligning education with student opportunity. Ensuring that graduates have strong options to apply their education locally will require sustained cross-sector collaboration focused on inclusive growth, industry diversification, and long-term talent retention.

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