

Expanding Public Sector Career Opportunities Act

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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Q What is the purpose of the Expanding Public Career Sector Opportunities Act?

A: The purpose of the reform is to remove unnecessary degree requirements from public employment positions. Many positions have experienced a phenomenon called “degree inflation” as more employers rely on a college degree as an indicator of career readiness, instead of using relevant job experience. These requirements limit opportunities for hard-working Americans and encourage unnecessary student debt. This reform does not apply to positions for which a college degree is a justifiable necessity.

Q Why target college degree requirements?

A: College degrees have become exceedingly expensive yet increasingly required for job openings. By limiting arbitrary college degree requirements and shifting to skills-based hiring, we can expand employment opportunities and fill public sector positions more efficiently.

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Q How can a state pursue this reform?

A: The state legislature can act and pass a law on this reform. The executive branch can also pursue this reform without legislation through guidance from the state's DOL-or-equivalent, or an executive order from the governor. This reform would be implemented within the agency at the state, county, or municipal level which controls staffing and hiring for public positions, such as the Department of Labor or a similar agency.

Q Does this reform devalue the college degree?

A: This reform doesn't devalue the college degree for three reasons:

1. First, for workers whose jobs require a particular credential or license that requires a degree, those state jobs will necessarily still require a college degree (e.g., nursing, engineering, accounting, law, pharmacy, etc.).
2. Second, a college degree is still the most likely pathway for workers to gain the broad base of skills that state may be looking for. For example, if college is doing its job, students should exit not only with some specialized knowledge and skills, but also with general aptitude for good writing, critical thinking, and the ability to communicate complex ideas with others. These skills, even if not necessary to open to employment door for an applicant, are certainly valuable and necessary for promotion and advancement over the course of a career. While it is certainly possible to gain these skills outside the college classroom, it may currently be difficult for employers to measure these abilities until a better micro credential system is developed (which we hope will happen as well).
3. Finally, for graduates whose degrees provided them with baseline skills necessary to perform a particular job because that program teaches relevant skills (e.g., finance majors who learned how to analyze financial statements and build economic projection models; developmental psychology majors who learned how to identify signs that a child is experiencing trauma; or an English major who learned detailed copyediting and writing) and those skills align with the job for which a college degree is an option, but the skills are likely more comprehensively developed in an academic program of study (e.g., a job on the state budget office's projections team; a social worker position; a copywriter position for the state tourism department), the college degree will still be the most likely pathway to demonstrating competency for at least the entry-level position. This reform may "devalue" college degrees to the extent a student's program of study does not offer them any relevant skills or experience that is of value to the state employee workforce. But this is already true even without this reform to expand pathways for skilled workers who lack a degree. For example, if a student studies biology, cannot write or speak well, does not take direction well in a lab, but is adept at memorizing intricate details and regurgitating them on an exam, that graduate may not be a valuable member of a state's medical research teams even though their degree otherwise seems relevant.

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Q Does this apply to existing job postings?

A: All current and future job openings would be required to determine if a college degree is necessary for the position's primary duties.

Q How would a state determine for which jobs to remove degree requirements?

A: Initially, a state or local government will undergo a comprehensive review of available positions and determine which fundamentally require skills gained with a specific degree, and which positions instead require skills that can be gained through applicable work or other life experience. The state can review new positions as they become available or are created.

Q Who does this reform benefit?

A: This reform would benefit the 60 percent of working-aged Americans who are non-degree-holding workers. Some examples include returning veterans with leadership experience; middle-career individuals who have reached a “paper ceiling,” but could apply their extensive industry knowledge for upward advancement; and overqualified workers who could be matched with jobs that accurately mirror their skills. These career opportunities and promotions could occur without trading years of lost career potential and hundreds of thousands of dollars on an unnecessary degree for the job.

Q Has this been implemented in any states?

A. Yes, in the spring of 2022, Maryland's Governor Hogan enacted a similar executive policy which has been met with favorable support. From May to August 2022, the policy caused a 41 percent increase in non-degree-holding public sector hires in Maryland. In 2023, Governors in Georgia, Florida, and Missouri signed this legislation and Governors in Colorado, Pennsylvania, Utah, Virginia, and North Carolina have all signed executive orders as well.

Q Is this reform anti-college?

A: The goal for this reform is to help qualified individuals gain public sector employment. The reform is not meant to block individuals with degrees from gaining employment. Universities and colleges will continue to attract and graduate highly skilled candidates for these positions.

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Q Would this reform cause the quality of applicants for public jobs to decrease?

A: While the standards for job qualifications will change, standards for public sector workers will not decrease. State and local governments will still seek the most qualified candidates who have demonstrable experience. The only difference is that many qualified candidates who simply lack a college degree, but have years of direct work experience, will now be considered in the candidate pool for public positions.

Q What about jobs that fundamentally require a college degree?

A: Certain public positions fundamentally require a college degree. The reform allows public employers the opportunity to require certain degrees if the employer dedicates a portion of the job posting to justifying the requirement as a narrow, specific, and irreplaceable requirement. For example, a biochemist for a state research university could still be required to hold a B.S. in biochemistry or a similar field; and advanced degree requirements for a licensing or accreditation structure such as lawyers or CPAs would be valid exceptions.

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