



ELEVATE CONCURRENT SESSION

Skills-First Employer & Postsecondary Connections



Making skills visible, trusted, and connected to quality work

High-Level Agenda: 75 Minutes

5 min

Frame the Challenge

5 min

Connection Moment: When Did Someone See What You Could Do?

30 min

Expert Exchange: Skills-First in Action

25 min

Application: Skills-First Tabletop Conversations

10 min

Close & Synthesize

Design intent Participants should spend at least half of the session actively discussing and making meaning with one another.

Connection Moment

When Did Someone See What You Could Do?

Think of a moment in your education or career when someone recognized a capability in you that was not obvious from your resume, credential, job title, or transcript.

■ IN PAIRS, DISCUSS

- What did that person see you do?
- What made the capability visible or believable?
- What opportunity opened because someone recognized it?

Close the exercise Skills-first systems are trying to make that recognition less dependent on luck, personal networks, or one perceptive person.

Why This Conversation Matters

CENTRAL QUESTION

How do we make skills-first practice visible in the actual connections among curriculum, workforce programs, employer practice, hiring, and learner opportunity?

THE BOUNDARY THIS SESSION IS BREAKING

Skills-first is not simply:

- A hiring strategy
- A curriculum strategy
- A learner translation exercise

It is a connection strategy that requires shared responsibility across learning, skills signals, hiring, and advancement.

JFF's Skills-First Point of View

Skills-first starts with what people can do

Prioritize what people can do

Treat demonstrated capability — not only degrees or past titles — as the starting point for learning, hiring, and advancement.

Build a fairer, more effective system

Make skills and competencies a clearer currency for opportunity across the whole system.

A cross-sector shift, not one fix

Employers, educators, workforce groups, policymakers, technologists, workers, and learners move together.

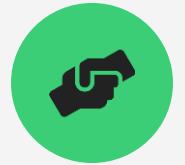
ONE CONNECTED ECOSYSTEM



People



Businesses



Communities

THE SKILLS-FIRST PATHWAY

LEARN

WORK

ADVANCE

Demonstrated skills & competencies stay at the center

SIGNALS THAT FEED IN

Degrees

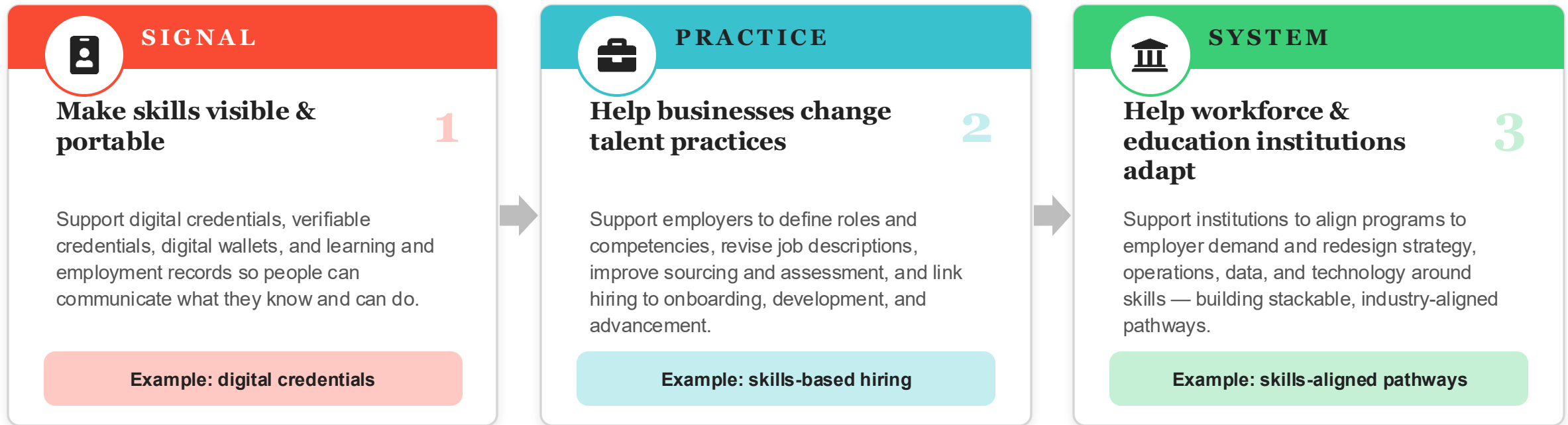
Experience

Credentials

*Important, but not the
only proof of capability*

How JFF Moves Skills-First from Idea to Practice

JFF works across three connected levers



Connected by a continuous loop: **shared language, evidence, and partnerships**

Skills-First Design Is Widely Supported — But the Ecosystem Still Needs Development

The case for skills-first is strengthening across employers and jobseekers, while adoption and infrastructure remain uneven.

EMPLOYER DEMAND



2X

Employers report that skills-first practices make it twice as easy to find qualified candidates.

(1) OneTen

DIGITAL CREDENTIALS



24%

About 24% of jobseekers have used a digital credential at least once in a job application process.

Nearly 9 in 10 users say including digital credentials has been helpful to their job search.

(2) Morning Consult

Takeaway Skills-first signals are gaining traction — but employers, education providers, workforce organizations, technology platforms, and learners still need shared infrastructure and practices that make those signals visible, trusted, and actionable.



Dr. Sara Lozano

**Northwest Vista College · Alamo
Colleges District**

Vice President for Academic Success

PRIMARY STAKEHOLDER GROUP



Institutions

Closely connected: learners, faculty, employers,
and community partners

Skills-first through industry-aligned academic pathways



HOW I DEFINE SKILLS-FIRST

Build academic and workforce programs around industry standards, community needs, career readiness, and demonstrated applied capabilities, not academic progression alone.



ONE CONCRETE PRACTICE CHANGE

Expanded applied, technology-oriented pathways, including leadership for a Bachelor of Applied Technology in Cloud Computing and a planned School of Emerging Technologies.



Michell Ward

Columbus State Community College

Director of Development, Office of Talent Strategies

PRIMARY STAKEHOLDER GROUP



Employers

Closely connected: institutions, communities, and learners pursuing in-demand careers

Skills-first through employer-informed program design



HOW I DEFINE SKILLS-FIRST

Align education and training with verified employer demand, regional labor-market data, wage signals, and the capabilities required in high-growth fields.



ONE CONCRETE PRACTICE CHANGE

Columbus State uses real-time labor-market data and industry partnerships to design and expand advanced-manufacturing programs aligned with regional talent demand.



Dr. Audrey Ellis

T3 Advisory

Founder & Principal Consultant

PRIMARY STAKEHOLDER GROUP



Institutions

Closely connected: higher-education leaders,
faculty, staff, and learners

Skills-first through institution-wide capability building



HOW I DEFINE SKILLS-FIRST

Help institutions build broadly accessible, role-relevant capabilities: AI literacy, change management, student-centered process improvement, rather than isolated programs or credentials.



ONE CONCRETE PRACTICE CHANGE

Use institution-wide AI adoption tools, readiness assessments, and communities of practice to move from individual experimentation toward coordinated organizational capability.



**Dr. Andrea L.
Kehoe**

Austin Community College District

Head of Product, Office for the Future

PRIMARY STAKEHOLDER GROUP



Institutions

Closely connected: learners, employers, and cross-sector innovation partners

Skills-first through future-oriented institutional products



HOW I DEFINE SKILLS-FIRST

Design institutional products and learning experiences around future workforce needs, portable competencies, digital fluency, and student success — not traditional program silos.

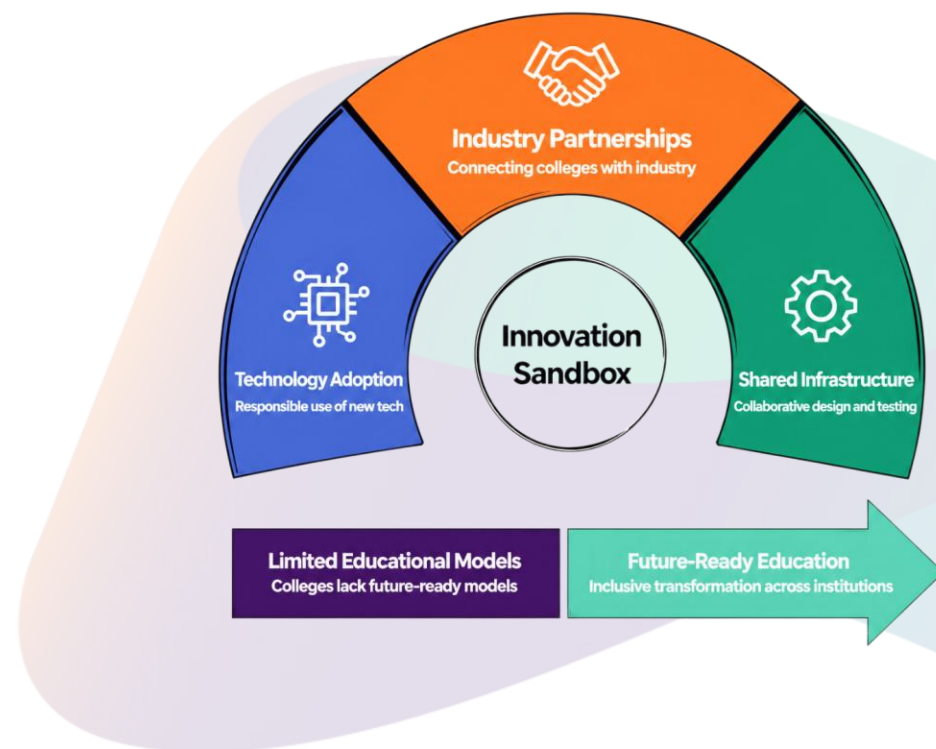


ONE CONCRETE PRACTICE CHANGE

Skills first is a product discipline. We design, launch, and measure institutional products that help our whole ecosystem, faculty, students, and the regional workforce, keep evolving as learning and work evolve. It's less a fixed list of skills and more the capacity to keep skills current.

The Alliance at a Glance

Accelerating Inclusive Transformation



Problem

Colleges face shifting learner expectations, labor-market volatility, and widening inequality — but lack shared infrastructure for coordinated experimentation and scaling.

Solution

Anchored at ACC, the Alliance is the first national collective-impact network for shared experimentation, agile development, and coordinated action across broad-access institutions.

Impact

Centralized R&D reduces duplication, drives cost savings, savings, and strengthens long-term institutional sustainability and agility.

4 Tracks

Fellows · Administrator · President/CEO · Future Fit Council — bringing together faculty, administrators, executives, business/industry, and cross-sector leaders to co-create a future-ready regional economy.

WHY THIS MODEL MATTERS NOW

Everyone Wants AI-Ready Graduates. No One Can Yet Say What That Means.

INSTITUTIONS

Under pressure to become AI-ready and update curriculum, yet few have a **trustworthy source of truth** for what AI learning outcomes should be.

GAP

EMPLOYERS

Say they need graduates ready for an AI-enabled workplace, yet most **cannot articulate the learning outcomes** either.

46%

of the private-sector workforce

99%+

of U.S. employers

The gap is widest for **small and medium businesses**, which have limited or no in-house research and development capacity.

PATHWAY FORWARD

Community colleges hold bipartisan public trust and credentialed faculty trained to study a field and translate it into practice. We believe they can close this gap.

The AI Externship Model: How It Works

*Employer fee covers the loaded
course release plus overhead,
which funds faculty training*

1 PREPARE

Faculty complete AI pre-training and consulting methods (async, 3-4 weeks)



2 EMBED

One week on-site at a small or medium employer: shadow, interview, map work



3 REPORT OUT

Deliver an AI Opportunity Brief to the employer: use cases and guardrails



4 REPORT BACK

Present a Curriculum Insight Memo to the department

PUBLIC-GOOD LAYER: Alliance of Future Makers

Anonymized cross-employer insights become a replicable playbook, a faculty training curriculum, and an AFM sandbox challenge, shared openly with participating institutions and the field.

Tabletop Exchange: Who Brings What Lens?

■	Sara Lozano	Workforce- and academic-aligned program design; faculty, program, and employer alignment
■	Michell Ward	Workforce development and manufacturing-aligned programs; employer connection and program design
■	Audrey Ellis	Implementation, change capacity, AI readiness, and institutional practice change
■	Andrea Kehoe	Institutional products, learning experiences, credentials, and future-oriented innovation

Tabletop Timing & Output

SUGGESTED TIMING

3–5 min

Choose tables, settle in, introductions, and connection moment

15–17 min

Expert-led discussion

5 min

Agree on one insight, tension, or question for the full room

OUTPUT

Each table surfaces one “What We’re Learning” takeaway.

Goal Harvest insight across multiple entry points—not produce a completed partnership plan.

Shared Prompts for Every Table

1

What are you seeing?

Where is skills-first showing up in this part of the system, and what is changing in practice?

2

Where does it get hard?

What tension, barrier, or misconception keeps the work from going deeper?

3

What should leaders understand?

What is one lesson, principle, or question you would want the rest of the room to carry from this conversation?
