

ACHE IMPACT

December 2025 / Vol. 1 / Q2



Alabama Commission on Higher Education Helps Launch National Apprenticeship Initiative

The National Project on Apprenticeship Standards and Interoperability (PASI) officially launched in September 2025, marking a transformative step forward for the nation's workforce and education systems. The initiative, led by the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) in partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE), is supported by a \$12.5 million federal grant.

Designed as a state-led and employer-driven initiative, PASI seeks to modernize and strengthen the U.S. apprenticeship system by embedding competency-based designs into Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs). The project will promote consistency across training and certification systems, ensuring that apprenticeship credentials are interoperable, portable, and aligned with employer needs and postsecondary education.

Through this effort, PASI aims to:

- Modernize the national apprenticeship system with shared, competency-based standards.
- Align on-the-job learning with educational credentials, making competencies transparent and transferable.
- Build a public-facing infrastructure to scale high-quality apprenticeship programs nationwide.
- Foster interstate alignment and reduce fragmentation across state systems.
- Support employers, educators, and policymakers in developing durable and high-impact apprenticeship pathways.

The initiative responds to growing national interest in apprenticeship models as states increasingly recognize the role of earn-and-learn pathways in addressing workforce needs. Over the past decade, active apprenticeship participation has grown significantly, and many states have enacted new policies to support these programs. However, challenges remain in ensuring shared standards, scalability, and consistency across state lines — issues PASI directly addresses.

Alabama's leadership in this space served as a catalyst for the project. The state's innovative "five-part test" for identifying in-demand occupations, developed under ACHE's leadership, has been recognized nationally as a model for aligning apprenticeship programs with economic development and workforce priorities. *(Continued page 2)*



Alabama Commission on Higher Education Helps Launch National Apprenticeship Initiative

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Dr. Jim Purcell, Executive Director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, noted, “Alabama has long understood the value of connecting learning to work. PASI represents the next evolution in that vision — ensuring that our apprenticeship programs remain responsive, consistent, and scalable across the nation.”

By building on Alabama’s proven framework and leveraging national partnerships, PASI positions the state, and the nation, to advance a more agile, transparent, and competency-based apprenticeship system that meets the needs of today’s employers and learners alike.

Campus Snapshots

Celebrating Accomplishments Across Alabama’s Postsecondary Institutions

Each quarterly newsletter will spotlight several of our state’s outstanding 4-year and 2-year institutions on a rotational schedule.



Jacksonville State University Named Top Employer Headquartered in Alabama by Forbes

Jacksonville State University has been recognized on Forbes’ 2025 list of America’s Best Employers by State as the No. 1 employer headquartered in Alabama. The ranking places Jax State seventh among 45 employers recognized statewide and the highest-ranked university on the list. Compiled in partnership with Statista, the rankings are based on more than two million employee evaluations nationwide, assessing employers on factors such as working conditions, compensation, development opportunities, and whether they would recommend their employer to others.

“We strive to make Jacksonville State a great place to work, so to be recognized on a national stage is very special,” said Jax State President Dr. Don C. Killingsworth, Jr. “This affirms the progress we have made and motivates us to keep strengthening Jax State as a workplace of choice, knowing that when our people thrive, our students succeed.”



Auburn University Montgomery - AUM MSAI Program

Auburn University at Montgomery is proudly shaping tomorrow’s leaders in business and technology through its groundbreaking Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence (MSAI) program. As the first AI graduate program in Alabama offered through a business college, the MSAI program has enabled AUM’s College of Business to build strategic industry partnerships — including the Hyundai Alabama Partners Alliance for the College of Business at AUM (HAPACA) — and expand student opportunities through grants from the Innovate Alabama Network and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. (Continued pg. 3)

Campus Snapshots

Continued

AUM Continued: AUM's emphasis on AI-focused teaching and research positions the university at the forefront of technology and enterprise while preparing graduates for emerging roles in data-driven fields. Students gain hands-on experience developing AI solutions for real-world business challenges and enter the workforce ready to support innovation across Alabama's key industries and beyond.

New centers within the College of Business — including the Institute for Executive Leadership and Innovation and the Alabama Innovation Lab — create additional pathways for students and working professionals, strengthening workforce development across the state.



Auburn University

Counseling AI

At Auburn University's College of Education, school-counselor-trainees engaged with alumna Katelyn Nelson, now an AI-education expert at the Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, to ask: "What role should AI play in school counseling?"

While students recognize AI's potential to handle tasks like data processing and communications, they emphasized that human connection cannot be replaced. Nelson highlighted the importance of responsible use—grounded in ethics, privacy (e.g., FERPA), and professional-human skills. Professors Malti Tuttle and John McCall echoed this view: AI may support, but not supplant, empathy and nuanced judgment.

Their recent national study of over 170 counselors and counselors-in-training adds research-driven insight into how this technology can be integrated thoughtfully into future practice.



Drake State Community and Technical College

Drake State Opens Leidos Advanced Training Complex for Aerospace and Manufacturing Programs

In April, Drake State hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony for its new Leidos Advanced Training Complex, a 50,000-square-foot facility supporting aerospace and advanced manufacturing education. The complex includes labs, classrooms, and space for high-demand programs like precision machining, welding, mechatronics, and engineering design. It will also house Drake State's FAME apprenticeship and NASA HUNCH programs. The project was funded through the Alabama Community College System's ASPIRE 2030 plan. (Continued on pg. 4)

Campus Snapshots

Continued

Drake State Continued: Leidos made a \$1.75 million donation to support training programs in the new building. In recognition of the gift, the building bears the company's name. The event was commemorated with remarks from state and local officials and Leidos CEO Tom Bell. Bell called the partnership a critical investment in preparing the next generation of aerospace and defense professionals.



ENTERPRISE STATE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Enterprise State Community College

A&P Students Getting to Workforce Faster with Mini-term Classes

The Alabama Aviation College, a unit of Enterprise State Community College, has implemented improvements to its Aviation Maintenance Technician (AMT) program to better serve students and the aviation industry. Beginning with the Spring 2025 semester, AAC introduced a new eight-week term schedule for AMT classes. The mini-term format allows students to complete coursework more quickly and efficiently, helping them join the workforce sooner. Traditionally, students completed three five-credit-hour classes per full semester, with options to attend either morning or evening sessions. The new eight-week terms are also offered both mornings and evenings, providing flexibility. Students also have the option to take up to four classes each semester, enabling many to complete their AMT training in as little as 18 months. Regardless of the schedule chosen, all students must successfully complete comprehensive coursework and pass licensing examinations administered by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to become certified aircraft maintenance technicians.



Gadsden State Community College

Gadsden State Opens the Advanced Manufacturing & Skills Training Center

Gadsden State Community College celebrated a major milestone with the opening of the Advanced Manufacturing & Skills Training Center on the East Broad Campus in 2024. This \$29.8 million facility represents the college's largest capital project to date and underscores its commitment to meeting regional workforce demands. Designed to support high-demand careers in fields like precision machining, welding, robotics, and mechatronics, the AMC offers state-of-the-art training labs and equipment tailored to industry needs. It also serves as the new home for the FAME and CoMeT programs—two industry-driven, work-based learning initiatives that have seen rapid growth in both student participation and employer partnerships. With this cutting-edge center, Gadsden State is not only preparing students for high-paying careers but also strengthening the economic vitality of the region through skilled workforce development.

Campus Snapshots

Continued



Ingram State Community College

Breaking Barriers: ISTC's Prison-to-Workforce Pipeline Sets Record with 512 Graduates

J.F. Ingram State Technical College (ISTC) celebrated its largest graduating class in history this May, with 512 students completing programs across 17 Alabama Department of Corrections institutions. This milestone reflects ISTC's comprehensive Prison-to-Workforce Pipeline model—a revolutionary approach transforming incarcerated individuals into skilled workers. Ingram State is unique as the only accredited technical college in the country exclusively serving the justice-involved population. ISTC offers 19 career and technical programs in high-demand fields including welding, HVAC, electrical technology, and industrial maintenance. The pipeline begins with technical program completion at ISTC, continues through on-the-job training at Alabama Correctional Industries, progresses to in-field work at work release facilities, and concludes with job placement assistance after release through ISTC's dedicated Reentry Division. "Ingram is focused on training students in high-wage, high-demand jobs that best benefit the students' success upon release," said ISTC President Annette Funderburk. "When students are released, they will be equipped with the skill set to gain meaningful employment and become productive members of society. "Beyond credit programs, ISTC services all Alabama Bureau of Pardons and Paroles Day Reporting Centers and most ADOC community work centers statewide, providing Adult Education, industry certifications, and short-term skill training throughout the criminal justice continuum."



Jefferson State Community College

60 Years Strong: Jefferson State Marks Decades of Educational Excellence

In 2025, Jefferson State Community College marked its 60th anniversary, celebrating six decades of fostering student success and creating meaningful change in the lives of those in central Alabama. Since its beginning, the college has been a leader in providing access to higher education and workforce training that uplifts individuals and communities alike. Jefferson State was recently recognized as the most popular choice for high school graduates in the greater Birmingham area, and also the most popular two-year college in Alabama. With campuses in Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, and Chilton counties, Jefferson State serves over 14,300 students annually. Thousands earn college credit while still in high school through Jefferson State's dual enrollment program, and thousands more receive workforce certifications in as little as six weeks and are prepared for immediate employment. Together, with its students and alumni, Jefferson State generates more than \$574 million annually to its four-county service area.

Campus Snapshots

Continued



Lawson State Community College

"Cubs to Cougars" Eases College Transition at Lawson State

Lawson State Community College has launched "Cubs to Cougars" to help incoming students transition smoothly into college life. The initiative pairs first-year students ("Cubs") with experienced student mentors ("Cougars") for guidance, support, and resources throughout their first year. The free program includes workshops, social events, and academic support services intended to foster a sense of belonging. "We recognize that the transition to college can be both exciting and challenging," said Stephon Adams, director of admissions. "Cubs to Cougars is about making sure students feel welcomed, supported, and empowered to reach their potential." Just days after the program was announced in June, more than 80 pre-college students signed up to benefit from mentoring, skills workshops, networking events, and access to campus resources. "Pre-college programs help students adjust to their new environment," said Mr. Adams. "We want to set first-year students up for success, academically and personally."



Submit Your Story

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(Re)Engage Alabama: Helping Adults Return, Complete, and Succeed

The Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) continues to expand opportunities for adult learners through the (Re)Engage Alabama initiative, a statewide effort designed to help Alabamians return to college, complete their degrees, and advance their careers.

Launched as part of ACHE's broader commitment to increase educational attainment and strengthen Alabama's workforce, (Re)Engage Alabama is a key component of the All In Alabama Campaign, the statewide effort to raise educational attainment and prepare Alabama's citizens for success in a rapidly evolving economy. The program focuses on identifying and supporting students who started college but did not complete a credential. Through collaboration with Alabama's public colleges and universities, the initiative provides personalized outreach, academic advising, and flexible pathways to finish what students started.



The initiative also helps institutions develop reengagement strategies that meet adults where they are, with options such as online coursework, competency-based education, and credit for prior learning. By combining institutional collaboration with student-centered support, (Re)Engage Alabama ensures that adult learners have the tools, encouragement, and resources needed to complete their degrees and rejoin the workforce with confidence.

Dr. Jim Purcell, Executive Director of ACHE, shared, "(Re)Engage Alabama isn't just about helping people finish a degree — it's about unlocking opportunity. Every returning student represents a renewed investment in our state's talent and economic future."

As the program continues to grow, ACHE and its institutional partners are committed to creating clear, efficient pathways that reengage learners and help Alabama reach its long-term educational attainment and workforce goals.

To further showcase the life-changing impact of adult learners who have returned and completed their degrees, ACHE will launch the (Re)Engage Testimonial Video Series in 2026. The series will highlight powerful stories of perseverance and success from across the state, inspiring others to take the next step toward completing their education and shaping Alabama's future workforce.

To learn more about the video series, please contact Dr. Jessie Lynn Nichols at jessie.lynn@ache.edu

Want to learn more about these scholarships and how to apply? Visit www.ache.edu and click on the "State Student Financial Assistance" tab.



Modernizing Alabama's Higher Education Funding: A Focus on Performance and Workforce Needs

Alabama is exploring performance-based funding for its colleges and universities, tying a portion of appropriations to metrics like graduation, retention, and workforce alignment. The goal is to reward institutions for producing results that benefit students and the state economy.

For decades, funding was based on enrollment and historical appropriations, but today there's growing concern that too many graduates leave the state. By emphasizing outcomes, Alabama aims to better align higher education with workforce needs, particularly in high-demand fields such as agribusiness, manufacturing, and technology.

Jim Purcell, Executive Director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, emphasizes balance: "The key will be to develop a performance funding rubric that encourages institutions to meet the state's educational needs while not inadvertently penalizing those whose mission is to serve at-risk students."

The challenge is designing a system that encourages results without penalizing institutions serving non-traditional or at-risk students. Metrics should reflect institutional missions and reward meaningful outcomes, including retention, credential attainment, and in-state employment.

For the workforce, a well-designed model can promote programs in high-demand fields while supporting students on alternative paths. Transparent communication and institutional support are key, ensuring the transition strengthens outcomes without reducing access or equity.

The shift to performance-based funding offers Alabama a chance to strengthen its workforce, better retain graduates in the state, and align higher education with the state's economic needs. Success will depend on balancing incentives, mission, and access, and on thoughtful, measured implementation.

Upcoming ACHE Events & Presentations

ACHE Commission Meeting December 12, 2025

Join ACHE for their quarterly meeting hosted in the ACHE Commissioner Conference Room 779, RSA Union Building, 7th floor, 100 North Union Street.

Christmas December 25, 2025

The entire ACHE family wishes everyone a safe and Merry Christmas.

Happy New Year January 1, 2026

The entire ACHE family wishes everyone a safe and Happy New Year.

Higher Education Day February 19, 2026

Join the Higher Education Partners for Higher Ed Day at the State Capital.

Upcoming ACHE Events & Presentations

ACHE Commission Meeting March 13, 2026

Join ACHE for their quarterly meeting hosted in the ACHE Commissioner Conference Room 779, RSA Union Building, 7th floor, 100 North Union Street.



ACHE In Action

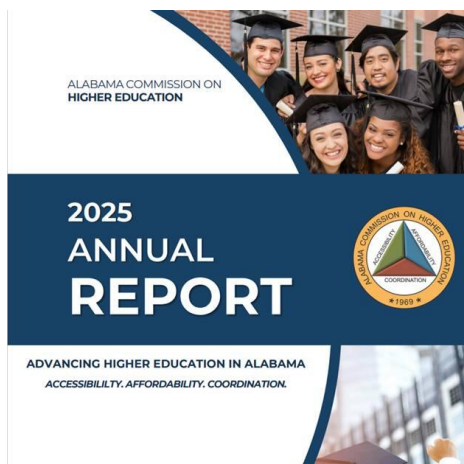
September 2025

ACHE Hosts Free OER Workshops



Dr. Purcell delivered opening remarks during the AUM OER workshop.

ACHE Publishes 2025 Annual Report



Explore our latest achievements, strategic initiatives, and future goals in advancing higher education across Alabama. From enhancing accessibility and affordability to strengthening workforce alignment, this report offers a comprehensive overview of our commitment to educational excellence. Scan the QR Code to view the report.



September 2025

ACHE In Action



Executive Director Jim Purcell delivered the opening keynote at the Higher Education Innovation Conference on the Florida Polytechnic University campus in Lakeland, Florida. His address highlighted how institutions can strengthen their role in regional and statewide economic development and outlined strategies campuses can adopt to position themselves as leaders in innovation.

ACHE team members, Dr. Patrick Kelly, and Dr. Jessie Lynn Nichols delivered a presentation on “The Lifecycle of an Economy and the Role of Colleges and Universities in Optimizing Regional Prosperity” at the 2025 Southern Association for Institutional Research (SAIR) Conference in Alexandria, VA.

Dr. Nichols also presented on “Rooted in Data: An Introspective Look Through a 40-Year Lens at Agriculture Student Success” during the SAIR Conference as well.



October 2025



The Alabama Commission on Higher Education was proud to join partners at the Amazon Web Services – Machine Learning University (AWS-MLU) event to explore the power of cloud technologies, machine learning, and AI-driven solutions for higher education and workforce development.

This collaboration highlights the growing role of innovation, digital skills, and advanced training in preparing Alabama students for the careers of tomorrow. By connecting education, industry, and technology, we continue working to ensure Alabama remains competitive in a rapidly evolving global economy.



ACHE In Action

October 2025

The Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) held its Annual Meeting on Friday, October 3rd. Members from across the state gathered to elect the executive council, reflect on the past year's accomplishments, discuss priorities and plans for the year ahead. For 41 years, NAAL has fostered collaboration and innovation among Alabama's academic libraries, strengthening teaching, learning, and research statewide.



On October 22, 2025, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education partnered with the University of Alabama to host the 3rd Annual Alabama Higher Education AI Exchange. With more than 400 participants in attendance, the event ignited transformative conversations on artificial intelligence in higher education, conversations that continue to ripple across Alabama and beyond.

On Thursday, October 23rd Dr. Robin McGill and Dr. Patrick Kelly had the opportunity to present at the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship (AOA) North Alabama Work-Based Learning Convening at Calhoun Community College.

Their session focused on Regional Education and Workforce Alignment, highlighting strategies to strengthen collaboration between schools, employers, and community partners to better prepare students for success in Alabama's growing workforce.



November 2025



On November 6th, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education Financial Affairs Committee has kicked off the FY 2027 Budget Proposal Hearings. These institutional hearings are held in accordance with Alabama's Open Meetings Act and may include members of the media, legislature, and other stakeholders. Recordings of this meeting are available on ACHE's YouTube Channel.



November 2025

On Friday, November 7, 2025, Faulkner University in Montgomery, AL, hosted the 2025 State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) Workshop from 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

The workshop featured speakers from NC-SARA, the State Authorization Network, WCET, and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE), who shared insights on interstate distance education and best practices for SARA compliance.



The Alabama Commission on Higher Education had a fantastic experience at the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) Conference. Attendees engaged with higher education leaders from across the nation, explored innovative strategies in competency-based education, and gained valuable insights to strengthen pathways for Alabama students.

We look forward to bringing these ideas home and continuing to support student success across the state.

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