



Converting the Classroom into a Job

Outside organizations help community colleges provide more effective workforce training



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When Tiara Hatch ended her Air Force career as a systems manager three years ago, she didn't want to pursue a degree. College would be costly and might not prepare her for a suitable position, she reasoned. A good job would suit her fine.

As she searched for ways to get training, she came across the website for Apprenti, a national nonprofit group that works to link up promising job seekers with technology apprenticeships and, hopefully, careers. Last year, 900,000 tech positions in the U.S. went unfilled. By engaging companies that need workers, lining up community colleges to train prospects, and getting people like Hatch who hold promise but no degree some vocational education and regular support services, Apprenti works to narrow the gap.

Its program, which will train and place 1,000 people this year, also aims to move people from underrepresented groups into positions often seen as ones suitable only for degree-holders, most of whom are white.

Hatch, an African American and a veteran, fit Apprenti's profile. After training for several months as a software developer—with her tuition covered by Apprenti—she was hired as an apprentice by JP Morgan Chase. Following her year-long tutelage, she recently accepted an offer from the company to become a junior software engineer.

“The work was hard, but I feel lucky that both the program and the company I was placed in really supported me,” Hatch, 27, says. “Where I’m from, I don’t know a lot of people, if any, who are in tech, let alone Black women.” The program gave her not just skills, but a newfound confidence: “They let me know that not only can I do this, I can excel at it.”

As community colleges look to expand their range and effectiveness as workforce developers, experiences like Hatch's are becoming more typical. Nonprofit groups and some for-profit companies have created pathways or started paid training programs that can help colleges keep up with the dynamism of the labor market. Dozens of two-year institutions across the nation are putting those programs to work, using them to add more capacity and flexibility to already existing job training efforts on campus.

Solutions developed by these outside partners can also help community colleges overcome the many challenges they face as they prepare students for the world of work, including inadequate funding, declining enrollment, and the need to fulfill a weighty dual mission of getting students degrees and training them for jobs.

Programs such as Apprenti's not only prep people for work but ensure that students will have a shot at good jobs with benefits that can help sustain families. While guaranteeing a year of pay as an apprentice, the nonprofit, formed in 2015, links prospects with high-quality job training that can transform lives—and, possibly, the nature of the U.S. job market.

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“We’re working to overcome the gap in training, but we also want to change the culture. We want tech companies to expand who they look for when they’re hiring, to look beyond people with degrees and see the value others can add,” says Jennifer Carlson, executive director at Apprenti.

The nonprofit provides training, much of it through community colleges, in app development, data analysis, and data center work. More than 80 percent of apprentices are retained by companies beyond their one year of training. Those who were previously employed have seen their annual salaries more than double, to a median of \$88,000.

Though the U.S. has a long way to go to even approach the breadth of apprenticeship programs of Europe, where nearly 70 percent

of workers go through such paid training, more stateside companies are beginning to see virtue in them.

“We have a long way to go to get to a tipping point on apprenticeships,” Carlson says. “But as a director of one of the first groups to roll the rock up the hill on this, I can say it has gotten easier.”

Getting people into the paying-job pipeline provides a mission for several other groups that work hand in hand with community colleges.

At New America, a nonprofit think tank that lists the restoration of the American middle class as one of its goals, education is seen as the key to getting low-paid workers tech jobs that offer a living wage. By sharing data-based best practices in community college workforce programs, New America helps them develop pathways beyond the typical AA degree.

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New America works with two-year institutions that are looking to form or bolster existing Associate of Applied Sciences degree programs that can prep more people for well-paying jobs in advanced manufacturing, health care, and technology. It has begun research into the value four-year baccalaureate degrees can add to community colleges and their students.

Six community colleges use New America’s support to increase their enrollment by making their career training programs more accessible and effective for adult learners who are looking to improve their skills or learn new ones.

“The emphasis of our partnerships is on training people for good jobs, and not crappy ones in certain low-wage careers, like cosmetology or call centers,” says Iris Palmer, deputy director for community colleges at New America. “Unfortunately, community colleges have very little say in what kinds of jobs are created. But it’s important that they ready people for the right ones.”

Another nonprofit group, Merit America, was founded in 2018 to improve the job prospects of the 53 million people in the U.S. who have no bachelor’s degree and who are stuck in low-wage, dead-end jobs.

By combining training for in-demand careers in data analytics, IT, and Java development with professional career coaching and peer support, Merit America aims to interrupt the cycle of working poverty. Through its partnerships with several community colleges, the organization has more than doubled the income of its first cohort of 1,000 graduates.

With a goal of serving 20,000 people by 2025 and driving billions of dollars in wage gains, Merit America uses an online training model to prepare people for new careers. Most online programs have had problems keeping people present and learning. But by offering levels of direct support, Merit America’s model has had much more success, say its leaders.

That model also aims to help community colleges “cut through all the noise of certificate programs. We want to take the guesswork out of which pathways are most effective,” says Connor Diemand-Youman, a co-founder. “Our model can make colleges more dynamic. They can only do so much with limited funds. We can draw more people in for them.”

Heavy on coaching, and on measuring the progress and outcomes of students, that model provides community colleges with an alternative to slow-moving bureaucracies and the underuse of data.

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“The system is static—it needs to be shaken up,” adds Rebecca Taber Staehelin, also a Merit America co-founder. “The focus has to be on making sure people are ready to take these good jobs, and that they thrive in them.”

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, and students of color and veterans. Ascendium’s work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit ascendiumphilanthropy.org.