



Getting Students to Better Jobs—and Faster

Shorter semesters and work-focused certificate programs help community colleges prep students in well under two years



PHOTO BY ISTOCK

Liliana Cruz’s long and winding path to a new career led her to the open road. But it took a few detours to get there. After serving in the Marines, Cruz three years ago began working toward an associate degree in architecture at Tri-County Technical College (TCTC), in South Carolina. Her husband, Justin Smith, who also served in the Marine, took business courses.

Covid-19 changed those plans. Studying remotely “was just harder,” Cruz, 25, says. So, the couple decided to leave college and take a factory job nearby. Problems with low pay and a troublesome co-worker led them back to TCTC last year. But this time, they decided to ditch their plans for two-year degrees and sign on to a program that would help each of them earn a living wage after only five weeks of study.

The couple’s decision to take a certificate course in commercial truck driving had prospective employers calling them while they were still in class. The upshot: The couple now drives as a team, delivering goods up and down the East Coast while making more than \$100,000 per year.

“We’re thinking very seriously about opening our own trucking business,” says Cruz. “To help with that, my husband would like to go back and get a

business degree. And TCTC is very much a part of those plans.”

A combination of pandemic-era necessity and strong leadership has led Tri-County and several other two-year institutions across the nation to create shorter pathways to good-paying jobs.

Such programs have become a boon for rural students looking to overcome poverty and a lack of opportunity. But they have served institutions well too. Community colleges face a bevy of problems—everything from enrollment declines to pandemic-era retention issues to the challenge of preparing students for work during a time of ever-accelerating change. Drawing in more students with shorter programs that offer the promise of linking them to decent jobs is one way for colleges to overcome them.

Attracting More Students

“We’re seeing a more rapid increase in programs that offer industry credentials as opposed to AA degrees and long-term certificates,” says Alexandria Wright, senior research associate for economic mobility at WestEd, a nonprofit higher-ed research group. “It gives students a tangible ROI and encourages them to come back.”

Rural areas are especially in need of educational programs that can help both students and colleges thrive, Wright adds. Those regions are much more likely than others to suffer from both a brain drain of

young people who head for cities and long-existing cycles of poverty.

“Once a defining centerpiece of the nation, rural America is diminishing as young people, talent, and economic prosperity gravitate toward urban centers,” notes a recent [report](#) from the Association of Community College Trustees’ website. Community college “leaders must redefine their roles with a singular focus on addressing longstanding inequities and promoting the upward economic mobility of their students.”

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Earning Credentials for Good Jobs

Dozens of community college leaders in the hinterlands, including Galen DeHay, president at Tri-County Technical College, have heeded the call.

In addition to serving 9,000 students seeking college credit at its six campuses and centers, TCTC provides workforce training to another 5,000 people. That number has grown since the college augmented its

classroom-to-work opportunities, designed to be completed in mere weeks or months, during the pandemic.

DeHay and other TCTC leaders leveraged their partnerships with industry to create strong, certificate-based courses that rapidly prepare students for jobs that pay \$20 or more per hour. Certificates in advanced manufacturing can be earned in nine months. An adult apprenticeship program in manufacturing pays students \$17 per hour as they learn. Another program aimed at local high school students—a “pre-apprenticeship program”—also readies students for advanced factory jobs.

Certificates for would-be power-line workers can be earned in seven to 10 weeks. Miners can be trained in four to six weeks. Patient care technician certificates are awarded after 16 weeks of study.

Most of TCTC’s certificate programs are integrated into longer-term academic schemas. They represent “stackable” credits and credentials that can lead to more learning and, if the student wishes, a college degree.

“The beauty of these programs, besides getting people on a path to a job that allows them to raise families, is that students can transition to an associate degree or another certificate program, if they like,” DeHay says.

The other advantage is that most courses are free. Government support has

encouraged two-year institutions to form more workforce programs that fit into students’ busy schedules. The federal government has made nearly \$2 billion available during the last decade for such programs, Wright notes.

“During the height of the pandemic, the [South Carolina] government funded short-term courses, so we can do them at no cost,” DeHay adds.

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Training Remote Workers

Besides endemic poverty, rural students face another challenge to obtaining education: distance. Many live hundreds of miles from the nearest community college. Some two-year institutions represent entire states, or large chunks of one. In many of those situations, students not only struggle to get an education, but to find work.

“One solution to the few employment options that exist in the rural world is to link people up with jobs elsewhere,” says Joshua Wyner, executive director of the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program. “Educating people to stay in rural areas and do their jobs remotely is absolutely a strategy that can work.”

While remote education itself hasn’t worked to draw more students to two-year institutions, community college leaders are hoping that new programs that train students for well-paying jobs they can do via computer from home will make up some of the difference.

As remote-work opportunities have arisen in a variety of fields during the pandemic—including medical billing and coding, IT support, and financial management—the Maine Community College system has begun to offer no-cost remote-training courses that only take six to nine months to complete. The system, made up of seven campuses, aims to train 700 Mainers from 2021 to 2024.

Leaders of the Maine program say that remote work likely will not end once the pandemic wanes. Preparing students in the nation’s most rural state to perform work for companies far from their hometowns has become part of the system’s long-term mission.

“This is about a pragmatic view of the future, one that represents a new ecosystem in the world of work,” says David Daigler, president of the Maine Community College System. “We want our companies here to hire

remote workers to help them be successful, and workers in the region to be better able to take care of their families.”

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The Long-term Advantages of Short-term Courses

While some institutions work to create more micro-credentials and job training certificates that take much less time to complete, others are cutting their semesters in half.

Shorter semesters and accelerated credentials programs can make a student’s decision to enroll easier. Job and family schedules are more manageable in the shorter term, meaning that more students are likely to stay in class.

At Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, which began converting semester-long courses into eight-week ones two years ago, [students in the accelerated and condensed courses had lower withdrawal rates \(4.1%\) than those in courses running for 15 weeks \(6.7%\).](#)

The same is true at Wilkes Community College, in western North Carolina, where many certificate- and degree-seeking students have completed shorter courses during the last two years; most run from eight to 12 weeks.

“That’s what adults demand,” says Yolanda Wilson, Wilkes’s vice president of instruction. “With the birth dearth, we can’t rely on traditional-age students to fill our seats. We’re trending well when it comes to bringing adults back to college.”

Helping rural residents develop marketable skills is an essential factor in helping such regions grow, Wilson adds: “If we don’t address rural income gaps, we’ll never be able to transform the economy of our state.”

Besides the benefits to the college and community, educating people in a 15-week IT training camp or via an array of eight-week courses in nursing, respiratory

therapy, robotics, and other vocations can quickly get students on the road to good jobs. Such “stackable credentials” earned in condensed courses can lead to a variety of good outcomes: jobs with decent wages, an AA degree with fewer schedule conflicts, and a clearer path to continuing toward a bachelor’s degree.

Such was the case with Misty McCall, a single mother of four who earned her GED at Wilkes, then took a series of eight-week courses in her major, human services technology, earning an associate of applied science degree. Now, she makes \$37,000 a year as a mental health support worker at a rehab facility while planning a return to a four-year college in the fall.

“It takes more concentration to do the shorter courses,” says McCall, 44. “But I could cover more territory while managing all my needs at home better. All in all, they have been a godsend.”

Ascendium Education Group is committed to removing barriers so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their academic and career goals. Ascendium recognizes that rural communities across the U.S. face unique challenges—and have unique assets—when it comes to building and sustaining pathways to socioeconomic mobility. This is why one of Ascendium’s grantmaking focus areas is Support Rural Postsecondary Education and Workforce Training, and why the organization is committed to elevating examples of innovation and excellence.

Ascendium 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.