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Building the Rural Work Force

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PHOTO COURTESY OF DEVYN GILL

Devyn Gill (center in the blue shirt) received a \$5,400 stipend toward his business as part of an entrepreneurship program at Patrick & Henry Community College.

Martinsville, a rural city in southwest Virginia, was once known as the “sweatshirt capital of the world.” The town’s five major textile mills accounted for three-quarters of the world’s sweatshirts. For decades, Martinsville was an economic and industry hub. But as the textile industry began to struggle in the mid-1990s, one by one those manufacturers closed their local facilities. In 2001, Martinsville’s [last one shuttered](#), sending the town hurtling toward [economic freefall](#).

There “wasn’t much going for Martinsville for a while,” says Devyn Gill, a resident.

Ever so slowly, the city is beginning to recover — and some of it may be attributed to the local community college.

Gill, who attended one of Patrick & Henry Community College's entrepreneurship courses in 2023, said the college's work-force programs make it possible for newcomers and longtime residents like him to find work and succeed in Martinsville.

Rural colleges like Patrick & Henry often serve as major suppliers for their region's work force, especially since many of the main employers in small towns require specialized training for manufacturing, health-care, engineering, agriculture, or other industries.

Strong work-force-development programs and the promise of employment create incentives for people to flock to — and stay in — rural areas, which in turn contributes to rural economies.

"A lot of high-school kids don't feel like they're doing anything unless they're going to a big-name university or something like that," Gill says. "But P&H is saying, 'We got programs and whatnot that we can do right here and can actually help propel you to success without even leaving Martinsville and Henry County.'"

Leaders at colleges that are raising the bar for work-force development say serving

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this role takes a multifaceted approach, one that blends the needs of both employers and students. Sometimes it's crafting a new certification for an incoming employer; other times, it's being flexible for students who work full time.

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A TWO-PART EQUATION

But how should colleges go about soliciting feedback?

Shelira Morrison, Patrick & Henry's director of work-force development, maintains a forum for discussion: She extends

a standing invitation to local businesses for a weekly open house with the department of work-force, economic, and community development at Patrick & Henry. WECD — or "Wicked" — Wednesdays, as they're called, provide a casual setting for Morrison to keep her finger on the pulse of local business needs.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BTW21 NEWS

Devyn Gill celebrates the opening of his personal training gym, GFT.

“We invited our partners here to the campus, not to sell them on our programs, not to talk a whole lot about customized training,” Morrison says, “but just as a sounding board to understand and make sure that we’re always abreast of what’s going on, what the needs are in the community.”

It’s a local partnership, in fact, that initiated Startup and Grow Martinsville-Henry County — grant-funded entrepreneurship “boot camps,” as Morrison calls them. The college works with the local chamber of commerce to host two courses: Startup, for new and aspiring business owners, and Grow, for people who want to take their businesses to the next level. Participants also receive cash prizes to help build their business.

Since its founding in 2015, Startup and Grow boasts 314 graduates and has awarded over \$570,000 to 74 [businesses](#). The companies, in turn, have created over \$5 million in capital and over 270 new jobs. For a small town like Martinsville, that makes a big difference.

“It’s a big thing in our community,” Morrison says. “Once people receive the mentorship, the resources, and they start working, then they’ve really created a lot of jobs in our community.”

Gill, who attended the eight-week Startup course last year after incorporating his business, Gill Fitness Training, in May 2022, says he heard about the program through Facebook. Once he was accepted, he received a \$5,400 stipend for his business, and eight classes, free of charge, that taught him how to run a startup.

“I’m the only one in my close family that has started a business. All I knew is that taxes scared me,” Gill says. “I didn’t know what I could do or what I couldn’t do. I didn’t know anything.”

That changed with each class, as he learned how to file taxes, live off his new income, and find a suitable space for his gym. Now, he’s got a roster of more than 40 clients and has cut down to part-time hours at his “day job” as a physical therapist.

Besides the practical ins and outs of owning a business, Gill said the Startup course helped him concoct a long-term plan. An expectant father at the time, he was trying to get his business off the ground before his son arrived — he hadn’t mapped out any goals past the next six months.

“I’m a very tunnel-vision type of person,” Gill says. The course “made me broaden my horizons.”

Gill plans to return to take the Grow course soon but says Patrick & Henry hasn’t left him high and dry in the meantime. There are regular community events and refresher courses he can attend for mentorship, and the college makes sure he’s “still hitting on the right track.”

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In addition to getting training and certifications in entrepreneurship, management, or other industry-specific areas, Morrison says colleges should also teach soft skills to help students get and keep a job.

Patrick & Henry was [one of 20 colleges](#) nationwide selected in 2020 to start a career-readiness program, a 12-hour course meant to train reliable and collaborative employees. The college will also offer an ethics course from that program soon, funded by

an \$85,000 grant from Virginia's State Council of Higher Education.

The college's work-force-development programs are the result of intentional, long-term relationships with local businesses and government entities. Morrison says these relationships should be top-of-mind for any college looking to expand its resources. Even casual conversations help keep her informed of internships, job-shadowing, and experiential-learning opportunities, she says.

But listening is only half the equation. Without taking swift action on feedback to expand resources, listening won't translate into any tangible impact. Patrick & Henry initially offered the courses because employers were discussing interviewing skills, Morrison says.

"We are not only listening to our employers and to our community partners, but we're taking action to ensure that we are doing everything that we can within our power to prepare our students," Morrison says.

Acting quickly can also mean devising credentials that can be achieved quickly. Not everyone has the time or money to get a two-year degree, Morrison said, so Patrick & Henry offers some certifications that can be achieved in just a few months.

Those certifications are an opportunity for people who want "to switch or change careers to come in, to get training, to gain a credential, and to transition into employment in a much, much shorter period of time," Morrison says.

WORKING AT THE SPEED OF BUSINESS

When the data and technology company Intel announced in 2022 that it planned



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZANE STATE COLLEGE

An electrical-engineering technology student presents a project to her professor at Zane State College.

to build a new chip-manufacturing facility in Ohio, Zane State College got to work.

Through several statewide grants and Intel's \$50-million investment in Ohio higher education, Zane State, in rural Zanesville, is working with other colleges in the state to establish a cohesive curriculum, acquire equipment, and provide professional development for the growing semiconductor industry.

To act this quickly requires being nimble, flexible, and thinking outside the box, says Marcie Moore, dean of business and engineering at Zane State.

"We're trying to work at the speed of business, rather than the speed of what maybe academia may have been known for," Moore says.

Another part of meeting work-force needs is building flexibility into the college's programs, Moore said. Because a strong majority, about 67 percent, of its students work, Zane State has gotten creative to help them succeed.

In some courses, like the electronics engineering-technology program, Zane State has different tracks — a daytime class and an evening one — that students can switch between, as needed, to accommodate

“We recognized that there are students who have to work, obviously, and that not working is a barrier to their successful completion, or even being able to enroll in higher education.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZANE STATE COLLEGE

Zane State's Marci Moore, wearing a cleanroom suit, speaks at an Engineering Technology Lunch and Learn event for high-school students.

varying work schedules, child care, and anything else that comes up.

Some courses also have Earn + Learn, a practicum in which students attend classes two days a week. For the other three days, students get paid, on-the-job training, like an internship or a part-time gig with a local company, that's established through a partnership with the college. When Earn + Learn started with a group of accounting students about two years ago, Moore says, the college used grant money to provide weekly gift cards for gas since some students had to drive some distances to get to work.

“We recognized that there are students who have to work, obviously, and that not working is a barrier to their successful completion, or even being able to enroll in higher education,” Moore says.

Melinda Boykin, a Zane State student on track to graduate with an associate degree in mechanical-engineering technology next year, says the college's flexibility is what allowed her to pursue higher education.

As a quality engineer at aerospace manufacturer PCC Airfoils and a mother to two school-age children, Boykin has a packed schedule that can vary at a moment's notice. Typically, she wakes up at 2:30 a.m., prepares her kids' lunches, and drives them to her dad's house so he can take them to school later that morning. She works from 3:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., then heads to class by 12:30 p.m. so she can pick up her kids from school later in the afternoon. Then, she helps them with their homework and takes them to sports practices before dinner. She fits in her own homework whenever she can.

Boykin and her husband went straight to work after high school, so she held off on college for decades. She started at PCC Airfoils as a factory worker almost 20 years ago and was “miserable” in that role, she



Melinda Boykin and her mom, Linda Moore, celebrate Boykin's sorority induction at Zane State College.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MELINDA BOYKIN

says. She moved up the ladder over the years, starting her current role as a quality engineer in 2021. The new job required a degree, so she used that as her opportunity to go to college.

"It's definitely changed how I thought, because for years I was like, 'Man, I don't have time to go, like, I can't go,'" Boykin

Community colleges have a responsibility to qualify people for jobs, which improves both students' economic prospects and companies' bottom lines, which directly feeds into a community's economic health.

says. "But they made it possible for me to work and go to school."

While Zanesville is in a rural area, Boykin says colleges like Zane State create a wider range of opportunities for local residents.

That's what higher education is all about, says Tracey Hooper-Porter, Zane State's dean of work-force development. Community colleges have a responsibility to qualify people for jobs, she says, which improves both students' economic prospects and companies' bottom lines, which directly feeds into a community's economic health.

"That's why we exist, to contribute to local economic development," Hooper-Porter says. "Individuals come to us as students to get a job. That is the end goal, to get a job."

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