CASE STUDY

Clear Pathways: From College to Career

With Support From Ascendium® Elevating opportunity

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Elevating the Different Voices of Student Success with The Chronicle of Higher Education

Ascendium Education Group is a nonprofit working to strengthen opportunities and outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds so they can secure good jobs and achieve upward mobility. Our philanthropy aims to clear the path for those whose route to and through postsecondary education and workforce training contains a disproportionate number of stumbling blocks.

One way we do this is by partnering with organizations like The Chronicle of Higher Education to share promising tools and insights. The Different Voices of Student Success is a vital resource for elevating solutions anchored in the experiences and perspectives of those doing the hard work every day to improve outcomes for learners across the country.

Learn more at **ascendiumphilanthropy.org**.

Ascendium®
Elevating opportunity

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Lia Douglas, 23, chose the MEMS program when she learned about its 100-percent job-placement rate. She completed her associate degree in fall 2023 and is now enrolled in the bachelor's program.

Lia Douglas, 23, always dreamed of going to college. Her family's financial situation meant she'd have to work and pay for her own education, so she did. She enrolled at Lorain County Community College in her home state of Ohio, paid her way by working at a regional sheet-metal manufacturer, and intended to transfer to a four-year university to major in mechanical engineering.

Then came Covid. Her two-year plan for her associate degree lengthened into three. Her housing situation changed and she endured online classes. By the time she was nearing completion of her degree, she realized something.

"I didn't have the funds to go to a state college anymore. I also was extremely burnt out," Douglas says. "I didn't feel like I had the physical fortitude to keep up with going, driving back and forth between a state college and home, and trying to maintain a job all at the same time."

She reconsidered her options and came across a new degree at Lorain: microelectromechanical systems, or MEMS. She took a tour of the lab, then walked up to the director and asked: What do the job prospects look like? He told her the program has a 100-percent job-placement rate — every student who completes it receives a full-time offer, often before they even graduate.

That sold her on it.

"I had already dedicated three years of my life to college. I couldn't put in more years without knowing if I was going to get something out of it," Douglas says. "That was incredibly reassuring."

Douglas completed her associate degree in MEMS in the fall of 2023 and is now in Arizona as one of six Lorain students selected for an internship at Intel. Before that, she'd already gotten work experience during the academic year at Lincoln Electric, a manufacturing company.

She's also started taking MEMS courses online toward a bachelor's degree, and when she finishes

her internship in December, she'll work for Lorain as a lab assistant and help other MEMS students. Soon, she'll be looking for additional work. But her MEMS studies have prepared her so well that she says it's not as much of a stressor.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Douglas is completing an internship at Intel this year. The MEMS degree requires students to get 300 hours of work experience in their field outside the classroom.

"I know that the program that I'm in is in high demand," Douglas says. "Employers know, through the program and through its reputation, that I am skilled to do whatever they need to do."

Students like Douglas, as well as partnering businesses and economic-development organizations, say Lorain has cracked the code for students who support themselves financially or want a degree that'll translate quickly into a job.

How'd they do it? The college created a regional job pipeline that aims to kick-start students' careers and meet the ever-evolving needs of local industry, an effort that administrators say prioritizes making coursework feasible for working students and sustaining relationships with local companies.

Crafting a Doable, High-Impact Degree

Kelly Zelesnik, dean of engineering, business and information technologies at Lorain, knows MEMS isn't a traditional career. The field of study deals with miniature microscopic devices that involve electronic and moving parts. MEMS technicians work on an array of devices like microvalves, inkjet-printer heads, and many types of sensors.

A MEMS job doesn't have the visibility of a policeman or a firefighter, and there certainly aren't kids wishing to be a MEMS tech when they grow up, Zelesnik jokes. Part of what's drawn students like Douglas to the degree is simply its record of job placement.

The MEMS program was established in 2013 and was bolstered by a $1-million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. In 2016, Lorain was awarded $100,000 from NextFlex, a San Jose-based organization that seeks to build a specialized work force in hybrid electronic technology, which helped expand the earn-and-learn model. That model has been so successful that Lorain is now extending it to eight other degree programs.

Students in the Lorain MEMS associate- or bachelor's-degree programs are required to complete 300 hours of work to graduate — not in the classroom, but in the field. Students typically start internships within their first or second semester, and the college schedules MEMS classes only two days a week so they can maintain reliable availability at work.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Kelly Zelesnik, the dean of engineering, business and information technology, says it's crucial to have program developers dedicated specifically to maintaining partnerships with local businesses.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF GEOFF LIPNEVICIUS

Geoff Lipnevicius, the senior manager of organizational effectiveness at Lincoln Electric, says he crafts open positions around the skills that students learn at Lorain County Community College.

Geoff Lipnevicius, senior manager of organizational effectiveness for Lincoln Electric, which is headquartered in Cleveland about 40 minutes from Lorain, says the college is often one of his first stops to fill positions. As of the fall of 2024 he had four earn-and-learn students from Lorain at Lincoln Electric — and he'd have taken more.

He says this model lets students and companies try each other out. "It's kind of a win-win opportunity."

Lorain also works with Team Northeast Ohio, or Team NEO, an economic-development organization that provides industry data and helps the college connect with employers and tailor its efforts. Team NEO has variations of this degree model in the works at colleges across the region, too.

Julie Szeltner, Team NEO's director of talent engagement, says it's crucial that this work experience is not just available but required for students to graduate. After the pandemic brought many challenges to socialization, she's noticed that today's students don't always understand the necessity of on-the-job experience or know how to navigate work and their careers.

"It has to be mandatory, has to be built into the program, because students don't do optional," Szeltner says. If colleges "can make work-based learning experiences [and] internships kind of mandatory and part of their program and part of their curriculum, that's what launches careers best."

Zelesnik says many of Lorain's students are underemployed and work several jobs to put themselves through college. The earn-and-learn model helps them gain experience in their desired field while simultaneously earning a living and college credit.

"Ultimately what we wanted to do is we want to flip them out of their service positions, their multiple jobs, into one stable job in their field that they can keep throughout their college, and hopefully have a full-time offer by the time they graduate," Zelesnik says.

Building the Pipeline

Students aren't left to their own devices to fulfill the program's ambitious work requirement. Lorain helps them find work by cultivating relationships with local companies, vetting positions, and providing career services to help them land the job.

The college has nearly 100 employer partners, big and small, including multinational companies like Lincoln Electric and Intel. Those partners provide tangible input on how Lorain can keep its curricula current and, in addition to considering Lorain students for open positions, help with résumé reviews and mock interviews.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Julie Szeltner, Team NEO's director of talent engagement, says Lorain's earn-and-learn MEMS program is so successful because the 300 hours of work in the field are mandatory, not optional.

Lipnevicius says he was "pleasantly surprised" at the quality of Lorain's advisory board. Not only is he able to tell the college about Lincoln Electric's work-force needs and see that reflected in the curriculum, he crafts the positions he offers to Lorain students specifically for the skills they are learning in the classroom.

"It helps us create a tighter relationship with the company so that they can believe that we are actually embedding the content that they need in our degree," Zelesnik says. "When we ask them to place a work-based learning student, if they have an opportunity" they know what we are teaching. "It is a good opportunity to hire our students part time and see how it works out."

Regional Partnerships

And work out, they do.

As part of that 100 percent job-placement rate, Lorain has created 218 job opportunities for MEMS students since the program's inception; 132 students have gotten a job placement, with some getting more than one. As of July, 114 were employed.

They also stay local. According to data from the college, 94 percent of the graduates of Lorain's associate-degree programs remain in Ohio one year out of college, 89 percent of its graduates are still in the state five years out, and 85 percent remain in Ohio 10 years out.

That doesn't happen by just dumping students out into the work force — the college takes a coordinated approach that includes connecting with businesses, keeping abreast of industry needs, and figuring out where the jobs are.

Part of this approach is the collaboration with Team NEO, which helps Lorain track talent gaps, salary ranges, and other useful information.

It's all compiled in Careers By Design, a training program Lorain faculty and staff members undergo that helps them guide students into three main industries in the region: health care, manufacturing, and information technology. They learn how to show students where the opportunities are, what the salaries are like, and what level of education they'll need to earn a family-sustaining wage in their industry.

"You don't want somebody to not follow their dream, but you want them to be informed," says Cindy Kushner, Lorain's director of school and community partnerships. She says the college doesn't push students into certain careers, but it wants them to be aware of degree outcomes and job prospects.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Cindy Kushner, Lorain's director of school and community partnerships, says the college worked with Team NEO to create Careers By Design, a training program that equips faculty and staff with the information to help students make informed career decisions.

Team NEO has condensed and replicated that training for other higher-ed institutions in the area. They work with 18 other colleges in the 14 counties that make up the northeast portion of the state.

Founded in 2003, Team NEO has weathered more than two decades of evolving industry. Jacob Duritsky, vice president of strategy, research, and talent, said structural barriers like a lagging labor force and declining populations in major cities have put a squeeze on the job market.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TEAM NEO

Jacob Duritsky, Team NEO's vice president of strategy, research, and talent, says northeast Ohio has struggled economically due to a declining population and labor force.

While there's value in exhibiting popular degrees, Duritsky says that to combat the labor-force decline, it's also important to link those degrees to tangible results — here, again, is where work-based learning comes in.

"We want to keep those folks here, so the more exposure they can get to the community, to internships while they're here," Duritsky says, "the better chance we have, we think, of keeping them."

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TEAM NEO

Nathasha Cresap, a regional talent manager at Team NEO, says Lorain's success is partly due to its forward-thinking practices that anticipate the region's future work-force needs.

A Model to Follow

Despite population and structural challenges in the area, Team NEO says Lorain is a prime example of work-force development on many fronts — in part because the college is always anticipating the region's future needs.

"Best practices include engagement, visibility, and forward-thinking, and Lorain County Community College does that very well," says Nathasha Cresap, Team NEO's regional talent manager. "They understand emerging sectors and trends within those sectors" that will affect companies that are growing or starting in the area.

Lorain administrators say it's crucial to invest time and people into building relationships with industry players. While faculty members are passionate and knowledgeable about their field, Zelesnik says, establishing those connections with businesses isn't always in their wheelhouse.

To remedy that, Lorain pairs academic advisers with program developers, whose job it is to reach out to companies and connect them with faculty and students. Faculty members focus on teaching while program developers maintain regular check-ins and do the legwork required to build a strong working relationship with industry.

For Lipnevicius at Lincoln Electric, communicating with Lorain at hiring fairs, school visits, advisory-board meetings, and during tours of the company means it never goes too long between conversations.

"It's ongoing, frequent touchpoints," Lipnevicius says, "and that frequency of contact has been very helpful in maintaining the relationship."

Kushner focuses heavily on student recruitment. Much of her job is reaching out to high-school students, people getting their GED, and incarcerated people in education programs to let them know what career options are out there.

She says it's about "trying to create the opportunity to explore and connect to a career path while they're in their education and training so that they're leaving with some momentum." Another thing Zelesnik recommended is adopting fast-track certificates. At Lorain, there are 14 short-term programs that send students hurtling into a new career within 16 weeks.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Josh McDonald (second from left) says that despite being laid off a few months ago, he's received several job offers and sees a path forward because of Lorain County Community College.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Josh McDonald (center) speaks to his classmates. He graduated with his bachelor's degree in MEMS in May.

This can be necessary, Zelesnik says, for students who need to get a job quickly — shorter programs like that can then be stacked into more advanced degrees.

"Sometimes people come to us and say, 'Look, I just gotta get a job, like I can't even think beyond that,' and so we have the fast-tracks," Zelesnik says. "But then, at the end of that, we're connecting them to a job and saying, 'Hey, this is a partner of ours. Why don't you keep going?' And now you're earning money."

Changing Lives

Josh McDonald says Lorain impacted his life for the better.

In the late 2010s, he was working for a parking-services company at the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. In his early 30s at the time and enrolled in an industrial electrical program at Lorain, he was staring down the barrel of a lifetime of working on solar energy and wind turbines — a job he felt would be too physically demanding to keep up for the next several decades.

"There really wasn't a lot going on career-wise," he says of his time monitoring parking gates at the airport.

Then, he heard about MEMS from one of his professors. He switched programs and did the fast-track course in 2018, earned his associate degree in MEMS in 2020, and graduated with a bachelor's degree this May.

McDonald kept his airport job for the first year or so but also worked with Lincoln Electric as an intern and then full time. He went on to work three other related jobs throughout college. Now, despite being laid off a few months ago, McDonald has received several offers and says he's on a career path where he sees a future — he credits Lorain for giving him a fighting chance.

"They changed the course of my life. They took me out of working in a low-paying maintenance job in the airport, and they've put me in a position to do so much better," McDonald says. "I will sing the praises of them and this program to anyone that will hear until my last days, because that is the impact that they've had on my life."

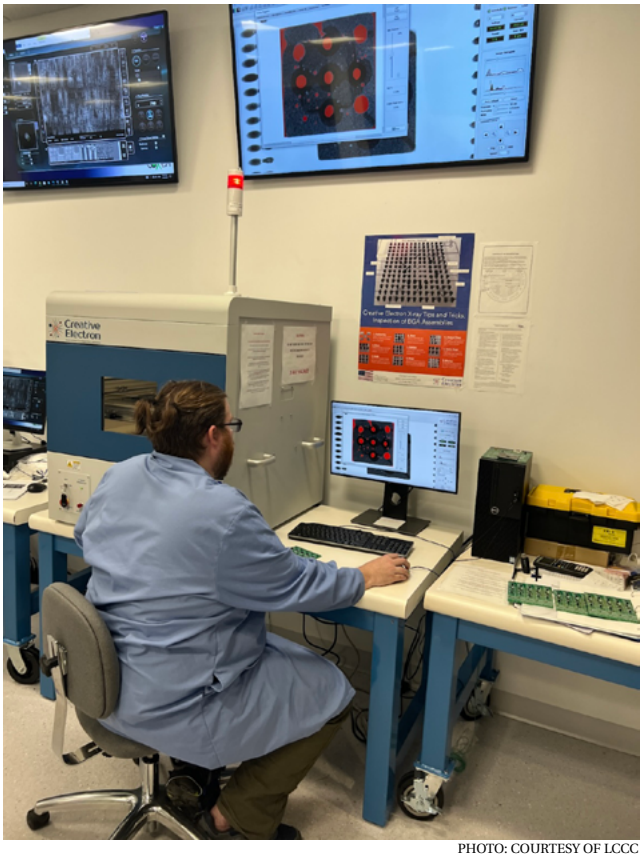

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LCCC

Josh McDonald credits Lorain with turning his life around and lifting him out of a low-paying job.

Questions or comments about this report? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

"Clear Pathways: From College to Career" was written by Charlotte Matherly. *The Chronicle* is fully responsible for the report's editorial content.

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION