

# An Earn-and-Learn Model Closes Skills Gaps



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Andrew Campbell (center), founder and president of Eastern Millwork Inc., speaks with apprentices on the production floor.

**A**ndrew Campbell had a problem. His New Jersey-based woodworking company, Eastern Millwork Inc., was on the precipice of innovation, automating production in a manual industry while preserving his firm's signature offering: high-quality, custom-made designs.

To excel, Campbell, the company's founder and chief executive, needed employees who understood both woodworking as a craft and the science of automation — an overlap of expertise that traditional American engineering colleges had failed to provide.

"They were not really ready for us," Campbell says. New hires required significant training, "but they had now spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on an education that honestly, to me, brought no value."

He approached several colleges in search of a solution, but it wasn't until he met Lori Margolin, vice president for strategic initiatives, continuing education and work-force development at Hudson County Community College, in 2018, that he found a partner. The college, based in Jersey City just three miles from Campbell's headquarters, would work with him to create an associate degree — applied science in advanced manufacturing — tailored to his company's needs.

Through their partnership, they've created the Holz Technik Academy — named after a German term that translates to "wood technology" — where apprentices receive employer-paid education while earning a salary and on-the-job experience as apprentices at Eastern Millwork. Upon graduation, they're guaranteed a \$70,000 salary.



PHOTO COURTESY OF EASTERN MILLWORK INC.

Thanks to the apprenticeship program, Campbell has a pipeline of the specialty talent his company relies on.

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Students describe the program as a launch pad for their future careers, where they can experiment with different career paths, gain professional experience, and pursue an education debt-free. Campbell, meanwhile, enjoys a reliable pipeline of the specialty talent his business and innovation depend on.

Margolin calls it a “win-win-win” trifecta — for the students, the college, and the company.

Apprenticeships are becoming a more popular route in higher education, says Taylor White, director of New America’s Postsecondary Pathways for Youth program. While the model has long been utilized by unions in construction and other trades to train new talent, White says more colleges over the past decade have jumped into the mix as intermediary between student and employer.

As on-the-job training intertwines with the more traditional college degree, many students select it as an accelerated, lower-cost education that’s tailored to their chosen occupation. The number of apprenticeship programs in the United States is growing steadily, White says, and has likely increased since the most recent available data from the Department of Labor recorded nearly 27,000 registered programs and 600,000 active apprentices as of 2021.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HCCC

Lori Margolin, vice president for strategic initiatives at Hudson County Community College, calls the apprenticeship program with Eastern Millwork a “win-win-win” trifecta — for the students, the college, and the company.

“Part of the appeal of apprenticeship right now, for learners in particular, is that it can be a low-cost way to get education and training that’s valued by the labor market, vetted by the labor market, and a route into a job,” White says. Whereas young people are starting to view traditional degrees as a gamble, “there’s some certainty in apprenticeship because you know what you’re training for. You know that there’s an employer at the end who’s investing in you as an employee and in your training so that you can grow into that occupation.”

## A Model That Leaves Freedom to Explore

Within six months of their agreement, Hudson and Eastern Millwork were recruiting their first cohort of apprentices in 2019. Since then, they’ve accepted 15 students: Three have graduated from the five-year program, four have either dropped out or relocated, and eight were currently enrolled as of early 2026.

Despite its small size, learning experts and political leaders alike view it as a successful model — one that solves a specific local work-force need and launches students into paying jobs. Former New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, once hailed the Holz Technik Academy as an exemplar of the “blueprint for New Jersey’s economic future.”

The advanced-manufacturing degree, coupled with the apprenticeship, differs from the traditional degree structure, in which students build a foundation with more generalized courses and delve into their major’s specialties as upperclassmen. Instead, after taking an introductory college-prep course, apprentices start learning the basics of cabinetry and woodworking right away. That way, they can start applying their knowledge in real time.

Hudson also designed the program so it could nest into more traditional degree pathways. Credits are easily transferable if a student decides to change course or pursue further education,

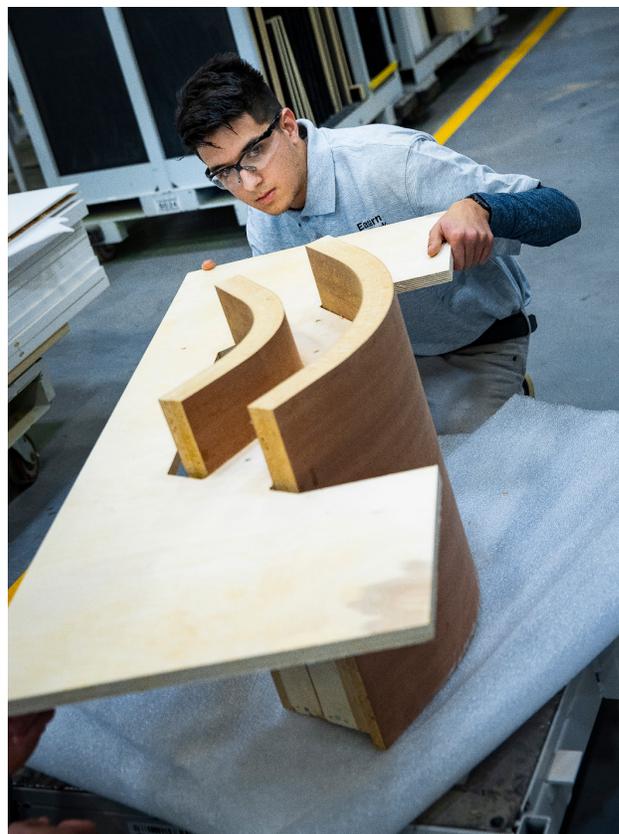


PHOTO COURTESY OF JERSEY PICTURES

An apprentice aligns handcrafted wood components.

college leaders say, allowing them flexibility without having to start over from scratch.

That freedom to explore is what attracted Hannah Garcia to enroll in the Holz Technik Academy in August 2025. As her high-school days dwindled down, she felt passionate about engineering and science but wasn’t ready to commit to one career path just yet.

“I was drawn to so many things that I was having a really hard time settling on what thing I would want to do for the rest of my life,” Garcia says. “It really drew me to this — that I could choose what I wanted to after actually trying it, like I didn’t have to put all my eggs in one basket just to switch it after.”

As an apprentice, Garcia splits the typical five-day week between school and work: She spends about

a day and a half in classes, where she's enrolled in the advanced-manufacturing degree with a concentration in woodworking, and works the other three and a half days at Eastern Millwork. There, she's trying out the estimating department: taking architects' mockups of each project and calculating the costs of labor and materials.

Just a few months in, Garcia says she enjoys the flexibility built into her work and course of study.

"Definitely after graduation I'm gonna stay, because I think there's a lot of openness with what you're doing in the company, and I think that that's a really valuable thing in a job, being able to transition based on what suits you best," Garcia says.

When crafting the curriculum, Hudson built in potential for growth, making an advanced-manufacturing degree that could serve more students along with the woodworking option tailored for Eastern Millwork apprentices. Scaling workforce programs can be difficult because they're not "cookie-cutter" models, Margolin says, but it's important to design initiatives with the intent and ability to scale.

"It's not like we have Model A and Model B and then that's what we do. The hours of the program, the type of program, all of that, these are high-touch programs," Margolin says. Each workforce program has a dedicated student-success coach to assist students.

## Meaningful Assignments and Support are Key

After earning their associate degree at Hudson, apprentices can move on to pursue a bachelor's degree at Thomas Edison State University, a New Jersey-based online institution with a flexible transfer-credit policy.

As apprentices progress, so does their earning potential. The starting salary of \$31,500 and

tuition-free education are part of what drew Nico Monzon to the program. He'd originally planned to attend another in-state college for architecture, but after mentioning financial struggles to his high-school guidance counselor, he applied for Holz Technik.

In his second year, Monzon's salary increased to \$36,000. He and Garcia both live with their parents — the starting wage is nowhere near Hudson County's median household income of nearly \$92,000 — but experience less financial stress than many of their peers.

**"There were deadlines, and it was new to me, but that was the job. ... They invest in us, they make us feel comfortable in the environment, and then we produce for them."**

"College students usually worry about how they're gonna pay for their classes, and at least with my friends, that's a big topic on their mind," Garcia says. "For us, not having to worry about that, it definitely allows us to focus more on school and focus on the skills that they want us to learn."

Monzon, who's in his third year in the program and started at Thomas Edison State in early 2026, says he's tried various roles in the apprenticeship. He started out with smaller organizational tasks, but as he developed his skills and earned more trust from his supervisors, he started contributing to what he calls "real-life" projects. For example, he started designing wooden pieces on AutoCAD, a 2D and 3D design software that he learned to use in class.

“It was stuff that needed to get done. It was deliverables,” Monzon says. “There were deadlines, and it was new to me, but that was the job, you know? They invest in us, they make us feel comfortable in the environment, and then we produce for them.”

Researchers say meaningful assignments — like Monzon’s designs and Garcia’s estimates — are key to effective work-based learning. Mindi Thompson, executive director of the University of Wisconsin at Madison’s Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions, says colleges and employers should steer clear of the “stereotypical” model that pigeonholes student workers as coffee runners or assistants.

“Those aren’t very effective as forms of work-integrated learning that students need — to be able to work on something that’s a real-world problem or project, that allows them the opportunity to apply their skills, and that are aligned with the organization’s needs,” Thompson says.

For students to succeed, she adds, it’s critical that colleges provide an adviser, mentor, or some checkpoint to help students navigate challenges in the workplace. At the Holz Technik Academy, that support comes from Albert Williams, apprentice-program coordinator at the college. He assists students with class registration, questions, and other bumps along the road.

For Monzon, one of those bumps was entering a professional environment straight out of high school. At first, he struggled to sit in meetings and effectively relay information to his coworkers.

“You’re coming into an office, and they sit you at a desk,” Monzon says, “and it’s a lot of people triple our age, double our age, so it was definitely something to adjust to, how to communicate in an office.”

When Monzon voiced his concerns to Williams, he connected him with a course that covers



PHOTO COURTESY OF HCCC

Albert Williams, an apprentice-program coordinator at the college, assists students with class registration, questions, and challenges.

business communication and office etiquette. That course, recently added to their associate-degree curriculum, helps both students and the company. Campbell says he would’ve seen some apprentices “go south” if not for the college’s support network.

Thompson, who researches work-based learning opportunities, says students often need help with the basics, like timeliness and appropriate workplace clothing. Some students may not have experienced that type of environment before, she says, and may not be acquainted with those “unwritten rules.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF HCCC

Christopher M. Reber, president of HCCC, says colleges need to create a “culture of care” in order to help students learn and succeed.

“We make assumptions that everyone knows or should know these things,” she adds, “but often-times what we hear from students is actually they don’t know how to do these things, right? Or they’re really nervous about doing these things incorrectly.”

## Helping Students Get to Where They Want to Go

While the partnership with Eastern Millwork has garnered attention, its 15 apprentices are just a drop in the bucket of Hudson’s work-based learning programs.

The college enrolls roughly 12,000 students working toward traditional degrees, says President Christopher M. Reber; another 12,000 are pursuing continuing education, certificates, and other credentials through the School of Continuing Education and Workforce Development, led by Margolin. It’s become a magnet for financial aid, grants, and other revenue.

This wasn’t always the case, leaders say. That arm of the college used to be a resource drain, with just four work-force programs in 2018 when Reber and Margolin both arrived. Now, it’s grown to 18, and the school rakes in roughly \$1 million in net revenue.

“We’ve just seen a steady increase in the number of credentials offered, the number of partners we’re working with, and with that, revenue that has come through grants and other forms of support that continues sort of a snowball effect,” Reber says.

He says colleges should be focused not just on attracting students but asking a central question: “How can we meet them where they are, and help them get to where they want to be?”

Part of that, he adds, is cultivating a “culture of care.” For example, the college is in the process of expanding Hudson Scholars, its one-on-one advising and stipend program for first-time students, to all of its credit-seeking students. For Reber, it’s an important step in eliminating barriers and providing personalized counsel that helps each learner succeed.

Scaling work-force and student-success programs requires a hefty investment up front, Reber says.



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An apprentice works alongside an Eastern Millwork mentor.

At Hudson, those investments — in faculty, in academic advisers, and in other support systems — are starting to show return.

Student retention among the Hudson Scholars is so high, Reber says, that they're bringing Hudson more revenue from Pell Grants and other funding than the initial cost of starting the program.

At the same time, Margolin says college leaders

need to be honest with themselves about what's feasible.

“You need to have the vision, that out-of-the-box thinking, the supports needed for the program,” Margolin says, “but then you need to be able to deliver it and deliver it at a very high level, and you need to make sure you have your village and your team that can do that.”

Questions or comments about this report? Email us at [ci@chronicle.com](mailto:ci@chronicle.com).

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