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Community colleges are an agile new player in job training

Millions of Americans rely on the traditionally low-profile institutions for fast, skills-focused education that pays off in the labor market.

By Tamar Jacoby, September 23, 2021



Arona Coelho at Northern Virginia Community College in Woodbridge, Virginia, where she trained to be a clinical medical assistant.

When Arona Coelho arrived in the U.S. from India just weeks before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, the only job that she could find was as a nanny. She was 35 years old, looking to make a new life, and heard from people in her church in Herndon, Va., about growing demand for healthcare workers. They also told her that the best, quickest way to a job was through a community college. “They said the training would be fast,” she recalls, “just the skills I needed for a job, and that many employers recruit workers from community colleges.”

It took Ms. Coelho three months to save the \$3,200 tuition for a short, job-focused program at Northern Virginia Community College. Training to qualify as a certified clinical medical assistant took four months, with online classes in the evenings and lab work on Saturdays. There was no question of a degree—she was in too much of a hurry for that. And as soon as

she finished the program, she landed what she considers a dream job in a local pediatrician's office.

Ms. Coelho is one of an estimated 3.7 million so-called "noncredit" learners who currently attend U.S. community colleges. They are largely invisible to the federal government, which keeps copious data on every other kind of college student, including community college students working toward degrees. Noncredit learners are enrolled in skills-focused programs that do not grant degrees, and they are usually ineligible for federal financial aid.

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Credit and noncredit programs at community colleges play an essential but often unrecognized role in job training, as my nonprofit organization discovered in a recent survey. In fall 2020, we invited all of the nation's 1,100 community and technical colleges to participate. By this spring, 477 had responded, providing detailed data about their students, programs and relationships with employers. Our findings paint a picture of a vibrant, evolving sector.

For most of their history, community colleges have lived in the shadow of traditional four-year colleges and universities. Many people saw them as a less distinguished, more affordable stepping-stone to a bachelor's degree. Even community college educators often underestimated their institutions' potential, seeing them primarily as feeders to four-year schools, focused on the same traditional, academic mission.

But that is changing as automation and business restructuring upend the labor market. Technology is shortening the half-life of skills and increasing demand for skilled technical workers. With fewer good jobs available for people with only a high school diploma, many students who could once get by without college are looking for fast, skills-focused programs that will pay off in the labor market.

People displaced by robotics and artificial intelligence need short, targeted bursts of training that enable them to return to the workforce as quickly as possible. And as the pace of change quickens, workers at all education levels may need to return to school later in life, learning new skills to keep up with the evolving economy. In response to these trends, many of the nation's community and technical colleges are pivoting to put job-focused education more at the center of their mission and culture.

According to our survey, more than half of the country's 11 million community college students are in programs designed to prepare them for the workplace. Among noncredit students, nearly 60 percent are job-focused, and nearly 75 percent are 25 or older.

For many students, especially older learners, community college holds out hope of a second chance. Mark Gilson of Woodside, N.Y., grew up around animals and wanted a career working with living creatures. He went straight to college after high school, planning to get a bachelor's degree in zoology, but when he flunked out of chemistry, he switched to a humanities major. College led to graduate school and two degrees in the fine arts; then he

worked off and on for 20 years as a commercial designer. But finally, in his late 40s, his youthful dreams caught up with him and he decided to go back to school to qualify as a veterinary technician.



Mark Gilson is veterinary tech student at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York.

Unlike Ms. Coelho, he wants a degree. “There’s just so much to learn to pass the national licensing exam,” he says. “You need to prepare as well as possible.” This time around, he bore down on a required chemistry course and is on track to graduate from LaGuardia Community College in December.

Among the biggest challenges for community colleges is keeping up with the changing labor market. Precision machining skills, no matter how advanced, have no value in a region where there is little or no manufacturing. And the coding language in demand five years ago is unlikely to command top dollar in today’s job market.

Many colleges use labor market data—government data and information about job postings—to track what occupations are in demand in their area. But the best way to stay current is by asking local employers or, better yet, partnering with them to provide instruction. Employers can supply information about industry trends. They often collaborate with educators to design programs. In the closest and most intensive partnerships, they commit to hiring graduates and help the college to improve instruction by providing feedback on their skills.

More than 90 percent of the community colleges that responded to our survey said they designed or regularly revised programs on the basis of employer input. And at many schools, it’s the noncredit division that maintains the strongest industry partnerships. Unlike slow-moving academic departments, which often need up to two years to get approval for a new program, noncredit instructors can respond in real time to changing demand from employers and job seekers.

Another way that community colleges keep up with the labor market is by preparing learners to pass skills assessments developed by employer groups. For both Ms. Coelho and Mr. Gilson, the road to a job led through a test administered not by the college but by a national industry association. According to our survey, between a quarter and a third of noncredit workforce students earn credentials—licenses and certifications—awarded on the basis of third-party tests.

Some state governments are out ahead in promoting innovation at community colleges, but federal policy makers lag far behind. President Biden is rallying Democrats with a call for free community college, but what most proponents of the measure have in mind is traditional academic instruction leading to a degree or other academic credential. What's needed most at the federal level is reform to make Pell Grants and student loans available to noncredit learners like Ms. Coelho, as well as data collection on noncredit programs to ensure quality and encourage innovation.

With or without these policy shifts, the new economy is driving change at community colleges. Lauri Byrne went straight from high school to college as a star soccer player, but she was so consumed by athletics that she left without a degree. When hopes of a professional sports career faded, she traveled and worked odd jobs for nearly a decade, mostly in the hospitality industry. Now in her 30s, she wants to start a career and is watching the labor market. "Look what happened to hospitality in the pandemic," she says. "I want a skill that will outlast that kind of upheaval."

Her major at the Waco campus of Texas State Technical College: welding. "It's a welders' market right now," she says, "and the college has connections to employers. This makes a lot more sense for me than a bachelor's degree."

Ms. Jacoby is the president of Opportunity America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group working to promote economic mobility.