

States look to community colleges to fill labor gap

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Caitlin Dewey Stateline

Monique Acosta began the month of March as a pre-K classroom assistant in Arizona, with no credential beside her high school degree.

She ended it with a certification in a booming branch of electronics and started applying to entry-level jobs at Boeing.

For four hours a day, over 10 days total, Acosta studied the fine art of stripping, cutting and crimping wire as part of a technical “boot camp” at Mesa Community College outside Phoenix. The program, created in partnership with Boeing and taught by company engineers, aims to rapidly upskill students into jobs that local employers need to fill

Now—amid a labor shortage that has baffled businesses and slowed the nation’s economic rehabilitation—policymakers, community college administrators and private businesses in several states are fueling new workforce-oriented initiatives, from tuition incentives and paid apprenticeships to boot camps such as the one Acosta completed.

These projects include a new, permanent state grant program in Texas that will fund the launch or expansion of workforce training across the state. In Louisiana, community colleges soon will grant full scholarships to students entering short-staffed fields such as health care and information technology.

In total, legislatures in at least 10 states have expanded workforce training programs at community colleges since the start of the pandemic or begun paying tuition for students pursuing in-demand fields. Governors, local governments, and individual schools and community college systems across the country also have made similar changes, contributing to a “real upswell in interest” over the past two years, said Martha Parham, the senior vice president for public relations at the American Association of Community Colleges.

Advocates of such programs describe them as a triple-win for students, employers and colleges, to say nothing of the overall economy. Since the pandemic began, the programs have drawn support from both Democrats and Republicans across the country.

But the success of these programs varies widely based on implementation, said Thomas Brock, the director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University—and many of the new programs scaled up fast. Among other issues, education researchers are concerned that some short-term programs feed graduates into industries with low wages and little opportunity for advancement.

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“On one hand, there is so much interest and support for short-term programs among policymakers and students, and there are good reasons to offer them,” Brock said. “On the other hand, the research has not been very promising overall.”

New programs ramp up

Many community colleges have long offered vocational classes. But legislative efforts to better align educational programs with workforce needs intensified in the wake of the 2008 recession, Parham said.

Eager to return unemployed Americans to work, and to support a larger economic recovery, the Obama administration invested billions of dollars into new and expanded career training. These programs increasingly required less than two years to complete, and often frontloaded the teaching of practical, industry-specific skills that allowed students to work while finishing their education.

Following that playbook, several states in 2020 and 2021 turned successive rounds of federal stimulus funding toward programs designed to quickly get students into the workforce, particularly in industries experiencing acute labor shortages, such as nursing, trucking and manufacturing.

“Time and time again, when the need arises for a skilled and reskilled local workforce, community colleges respond,” said Anne Kress, the president of Northern Virginia Community College, in testimony to a U.S. House subcommittee in November. “Community colleges across the state and the nation are prepared to partner on workforce solutions that advance regional economies and real families.”

Among the states and college systems expanding their workforce training programs, Virginia often is cited as the premiere model. Well before the pandemic, the state’s FastForward initiative credentialed nurse aides, commercial drivers and other high-demand workers in six- to 12-week community college courses.

When COVID-19 hit, the state spun up two additional, overlapping programs. The first, a short-term project called Re-Employing Virginians, provided community college tuition assistance of up to \$3,000 for workers affected by the pandemic.

The second, a continuing initiative called G3, offers full or partial tuition assistance and wraparound services, such as food aid and child care, to low- and middle-income Virginians. Many of its programs consist of multiple levels of training, in which students first work toward certifications or industry credentials they can take into the workplace immediately, and later “stack” toward an associate degree.

To qualify for either program, students must pursue a degree or credential in one of the state’s most high-demand industries: childhood education, health care, information technology, the skilled trades and public safety. (Re-Employing Virginians also included manufacturing.)

At Northern Virginia Community College, Kress told *Stateline*, enrollment actually increased last year, in defiance of national trends. The school, which has emphasized its IT certificate and credential courses, also received more than \$5 million in federal funding last month to ramp up a data center operations degree and certificate program.

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“Employers get the talent that they need, community colleges are able to tout these relationships and job placements with employers, and students get the education and training experiences that equal a seamless transition into employment,” said Jaimie Francis, the vice president of policy and programs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, which supports this type of collaboration. “That’s ultimately what we all need to be working towards.”

Over the past two years, several other states—and an unknown number of individual colleges—have sought to make similar investments. Since the start of the pandemic, Alabama, Connecticut, Maine, Michigan, Nevada, New York and Texas all have launched or expanded short-term training programs, many aimed at short-staffed industries. Louisiana, Minnesota, North Carolina and Washington, D.C., also have created industry-specific financial aid programs that incentivize students to pursue careers in fields including construction, nursing, tourism, information technology and transportation.

Beginning this summer, Louisiana will offer full scholarships to community college students entering high-demand fields. Alabama, meanwhile, opened a \$10 million workforce training center through the state community college

system in mid-February; the state legislature has since allocated another \$15 million to the center. At its inauguration, Chancellor Jimmy H. Baker described the facility as “a way to expedite the training so we can move people more rapidly into the market.”

Some new programs have originated not with government or school systems, but with employers themselves. These types of partnerships, some of which include paid internships or apprenticeships, have long boosted student job placement after graduation, said Joe Garcia, the chancellor of the Colorado Community College System.

At Community College of Aurora, for instance, a one-year diesel power mechanics program developed in collaboration with a local trade association boasts a post-grad employment rate of nearly 100%. This year, the school expects to break ground on an expanded facility to house both the diesel mechanics course and a similar, industry-partnered program in construction.

“When I was the president of one of our community colleges 20 years ago, it was very hard to get these programs in place,” Garcia said. “Now [employers] realize there are immediate economic consequences if they don’t get workers, and they want to make sure we are working to teach” the exact skills in demand.

Mixed evidence

As they’ve grown, workforce training and incentive programs have benefited from their popularity on both sides of the aisle, said Iris Palmer, the deputy director for community colleges at the nonpartisan think tank New America. On the right, the initiatives often enjoy strong support from business groups and employers. On the left, they track with efforts to increase opportunity for low-income Americans and people of color, who disproportionately enroll in community colleges and certificate programs.

But these programs still have faced challenges, political and otherwise.

In Colorado, a proposed bill that would have allocated \$650,000 toward tuition assistance for students in short-run construction programs died after an electricians union objected, said state Sen. Larry Liston, a Republican. The two largest electricians unions in the country jointly operate their own training and apprenticeship program.

In Maine, meanwhile, a recent proposal by Democratic Gov. Janet Mills to boost skills training through two years of free community college was met with fierce opposition from high-profile Republicans, who called the costly program “an election-year gimmick.”

“Community college is a powerful tool,” Mills countered in a statement. “From programs in construction and electrical lineworker technology to nursing and mental health, students will be able to obtain the skills and credentials they need to help solve Maine’s biggest workforce challenges.”

When politicians object to workforce training or incentive programs, their concerns generally involve cost and efficacy, Palmer said. Policymakers often want to know how many students these programs will graduate and how many jobs they will fill.

But the success of short-term training programs varies widely according to their design and content area, said Brock of Columbia University. The best programs include rigorous support services, such as financial assistance and proactive advising, he said. Workforce training initiatives also perform better, in terms of student retention and employment, when they yield a recognized industry credential and feed directly into high-demand, well-paid jobs—such as the boot camp Monique Acosta completed at Mesa Community College.

Students in that program finish with a certification in what is known as the IPC/WHMA-A-620, an industry standard for building electrical arrays, said David Medrano, a former Boeing engineer who taught Acosta’s class. They’re then encouraged to apply for technician jobs at Boeing, where entry-level workers can expect to make about \$20 per hour, plus benefits and generous tuition assistance. Acosta, who made \$14 per hour at her previous job, hopes the increase will allow her to move out of her parents’ house and into her own apartment.

“I’ve been working on my resume all morning,” she told *Stateline*, only four days after the program ended. “I’m super excited to try something new. Something that pays better.”

But balancing the needs of students and employers is a delicate art, Palmer said, and some programs have leaned too far toward employers—training students for low-paying jobs with high churn rates and little to no benefits. Multiple states now incentivize students to pursue careers as nurse aides, for instance. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national median wage for nursing assistants—who frequently work nights and weekends and suffer one of the highest on-the-job injury rates—fell below \$15 per hour in 2020.

One recent report, published by researchers at Georgetown University, found that certificate programs in fields such as cosmetology left students near the federal poverty line even after completion—a particularly troubling finding for students who took on debt. An earlier large-scale working paper, published in 2017 by researchers at Columbia University, found that students who completed certificate programs saw a modest bump in income, on average.

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But these findings also varied according to subject matter, with students in vocational fields far out-earning their peers on general education tracks.

“The real weakness here is that there is this focus on short-term training that will lead to ‘good jobs,’” Palmer said. “But a lot of these positions are not good jobs—they’re just in high demand.”

Education experts emphasize, however, that workforce-oriented programs are still evolving, and that well-designed programs could benefit both students and employers. In recent years, short-term programs in fields such as engineering and IT, and in places such as Virginia, have yielded more promising results, Brock said. Funding should continue to flow to community colleges that are experimenting with new short-term models, he added.

After all, many students in these programs see real results. On April 5, shortly after submitting her resume to Boeing, Acosta was contacted by a company recruiter about an open technician position. She hopes to start with Boeing within the next several weeks and has already left her job as a classroom assistant.

“It was very, very hard for me to say my goodbyes to the kiddos,” Acosta said. “But I’m so excited.”

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