



Published on *Inside Higher Ed*

(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)

[Home](#) > Three factors will impact community college efforts to make workforce training relevant following the pandemic (opinion)

Three factors will impact community college efforts to make workforce training relevant following the pandemic (opinion)

Submitted by Jim Jacobs and Maria Cormier on May 28, 2020 - 3:00am

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has disrupted many day-to-day operations at community colleges. At the same time, an opportunity exists for community colleges to adjust their workforce development activities in ways that could serve the country's economic recovery.

Any response from community colleges, however, will have to consider employers' uncertainty over what skills their workers will need and how those will change as the economy recovers, potentially leading to a realignment of the roles of community colleges and employers in workforce training. Three important factors are likely to impact community college efforts to make their workforce training relevant to the changing economic landscape.

First, over the next several years, budget cuts will hurt community colleges' ability to invest in new workforce programs or even maintain equipment for existing ones. The significant curricular and programmatic adjustments that colleges were making before the pandemic to [meet the demands of automation and technological change](#) [1] in the workplace will probably be scaled back. In addition, new social distancing requirements in labs and other work areas could require additional investments to allow students to meet those requirements.

Second, community college workforce training programs will need to think about how to deliver online and remote instruction. Online and remote learning represent sharp breaks for many occupational programs, which traditionally rely on in-person, hands-on instruction, particularly in the trades. Colleges will likely have to come up with creative ways to help workforce training faculty adopt new ways of teaching.

Finally, as the economy ramps up, colleges will need to reinvent themselves to meet evolving industry and employer skill needs. But given the significance of the economic downturn and the recovery's uncertainty, employers may be unsure about what skills are needed, and the skill needs could change quickly.

The good news is current trends within workforce development offer ways for colleges to meet these challenges. For instance, increasing demand for short-term certificates and quick entry into the labor market allows for greater development of industry-certified credentials. Increasing efforts to integrate credit and noncredit workforce training programs further allow colleges to adapt to fluctuating labor market demands with innovative programs that better reflect employers' shifting needs. While it may take new credit programs and courses at least two years to receive approval and accreditation, colleges often have more flexibility in creating noncredit programs and employer certificates. Moreover, housing credit and noncredit programs together allows students to upskill while they earn credits that they can later apply to a degree program that further advances their career opportunities.

To address employers' uncertainty about skills, colleges can continue to develop students' workplace readiness and to prepare them for entry-level jobs. Across industries, employers are increasingly looking for strong work readiness and soft skills -- for instance, the ability to communicate, work in teams and take initiative -- in prospective hires. In some instances, employers suggest that a robust set of soft skills is more important than knowing how to use the latest technology. In response, community colleges are embedding workplace readiness skills into workforce training curricula and instruction.

Colleges can also capitalize on existing work-based learning approaches to teach workers the skills they will need for a particular position. Work-based learning approaches -- typically apprenticeships, internships and cooperative education -- give employers the responsibility for specialized training while accelerating students' transition into the workplace, more quickly providing them with an income that many desperately need. The college would provide students the foundational skills training, and the companies would be responsible for the technical training. Scaling this approach will not only help employers restart the economy as businesses start opening up but also allow communities to return to some form of economic normalcy -- a welcome goal in these difficult times.

Work-based learning approaches have been pioneered in community college allied health programs, for instance in nursing program practicums where students work inside the hospital to obtain necessary on-the-job skills. As automation and technological changes continue to shift the nature of work in many entry-level positions, a growing number of employers outside of allied health programs, such as in the IT sector, are also seeking to provide technology training through work-based learning opportunities.

Building upon these trends could save colleges significant amounts of money that is typically spent on specialized workforce training equipment. Given the loss of college revenue from state cutbacks and potentially decreasing enrollments, this will be welcomed. It would also shorten students' preparation time before entering the workforce, helping adults with families who need income quickly. Finally, it responds to criticism by some employers who have questioned whether colleges have overspecialized their programs, producing workers with skills that don't match available jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted higher education and the economy in ways no one anticipated. As the nation considers what is needed to recover, community colleges will play a central role in training people who need jobs and in helping employers find skilled workers. For this to happen, community colleges will need to address a set of growing financial and instructional challenges. We are optimistic that they can and will rise to the occasion, as they have always done, by building off promising efforts already underway.

Jim Jacobs is the president emeritus of Macomb Community College and a research affiliate with the Community College Research Center. Maria Cormier is a senior research associate with CCRC.

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/28/three-factors-will-impact-community-college-efforts-make-workforce-training>

Links

[1] <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/community-colleges-future-of-work.html>

[2] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/community_colleges