

# Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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Middle-skill jobs, which require education beyond high school but not a four-year degree, make up the largest part of America's labor market. Key industries...are unable to find enough sufficiently trained workers to fill these jobs.

- National Skills Coalition

There is general agreement that community colleges have a role to play in closing the middle skills gap. What is less understood is how to most effectively do that.

- Yves Salomon-Fernandez

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## Middle Skills and the At-Risk Student: The Muscatine Community College Story

**Naomi DeWinter, EdD**

President  
Muscatine Community College  
Muscatine, Iowa

I confess I do not know the difference between stick welding and flux-core welding. I have, however, become passionate about training welders in Muscatine, Iowa. As fewer traditional-aged men choose to attend college, at least in our region of eastern Iowa, what I present may be a novel way to think about training for the middle-skills jobs widely available in our manufacturing-heavy city.

**Community colleges do not shy away from challenges or at-risk students. Give us an at-risk student and we will give him or her our best shot each and every time.**

Like many great collaborations, this training project began with a question: How quickly could we train clients of Muscatine Center for Social Action (MCSA) to become welders? MCSA provides housing, basic healthcare, and educational and support services for those in need in Muscatine County. Kris Lee, President of Hoffmann, Inc., wanted to offer welding positions to the MCSA population. They were willing to overlook past convictions and give people a new beginning with a stable, welding wage. Community colleges do not shy away from challenges or at-risk students. Give us an at-risk student and we will give him or her our best shot each and every time. These students were at-risk in every sense of the word: past criminal records, big gaps in formal education, homelessness, health issues, and a low level of confidence.

MCSA programs served over 1,000 women, men, and children in 2017. We believed the best way to secure a more stable and promising future was to increase their income potential and train them for middle skills jobs. We knew this pilot project would require business involvement, addressing past convictions, creative funding solutions, faculty and staff engagement, MCSA staff support, and ladder training. This short article explains how Muscatine Community College (MCC), in collaboration with many others, was able to accomplish all of the above.

**Business Involvement.** Our measure of success was whether students became employed in a middle-skills job. Short of that, we would have considered the project worthwhile but disappointing. We had several local businesses who were eager to work with our students: Hoffmann, Inc., SSAB, Raymond, Wilton Precision Steel,

and Union Tank Car. Businesses offered tours of their facilities so students could begin making decisions about their preferred employment site and meet owners and employees. One of our students commented after one of the tours:

*"I got to meet the real owner of the company and I liked the fact that he told us that his company was committed to help bring us up to their level which is very important to me. That kind of calmed my fear, I really want a job. I'm hoping I can make it to that level and continue to grow within the company" (Miguel).*

Employers also provided intermittent feedback on their welding skills by either offering welding "pre-tests" at their site or by visiting the MCC welding lab and interacting with the students directly. These were valuable components of the program. After a tour of Raymond, Muscatine, one the students determined that was where he wanted to work. He focused his future training on Raymond and aced the welding test. The certified welding instructor was impressed and even more encouraged when he heard from the MCC instructor that this student was one of the hardest workers in the program. The personal reference and the student's interview led the company to overlook employment gaps in this student's history. This was the first hire from the program and everyone involved jumped for joy!

**A critical component to the success of the training was that businesses were willing to take a chance on employees with past convictions.**

**Past Convictions.** A critical component to the success of the training was that businesses were willing to take a chance on employees with past convictions. The college offered a seminar on Federal bonding to area employers so that more could consider this option.

*"We have found at Hoffmann that we have to be understanding and try to work with people. There are a lot of people that come to our facility who don't have a driver's license and we have crew cabs so that we get them to work. What we feel as an employer, if we can help get through some of those obstacles we can maybe get people gainfully employed and get them into a successful career so they can make something of their lives." (Kris Lee, Owner of Hoffmann, Inc.).*

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## EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

*In today's changing economy, we are seeing an emphasis on middle-skills jobs – those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. Middle-skills jobs make up the largest part of America's labor market, yet many key industries are unable to find enough sufficiently trained workers, resulting in a middle-skills gap. As baby boomers retire, associate's degrees and certificates have become increasingly important for finding good jobs. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.*

### Nicole Ellet-Petersen, MA

Faculty, Chair of Language and Arts, and Assessment Facilitator  
Gogebic Community College  
Ironwood, Michigan

To meet the enormous challenges of the 21st century, community colleges should expand their notion of workforce readiness. Dramatic technological breakthroughs will continue to impact industry on a large scale, and the jobs that exist now and will emerge require new skill sets. Community colleges must be willing to reshape themselves to better prepare students to be lifelong participants in this new economy.

As institutions with community development at the core of their mission, community colleges should continue to take a regional focus, partnering closely with employers to understand how the local economy is impacted by larger trends and determine emerging opportunities. Fields that require some postsecondary education but less than a bachelor's degree (middle-skills jobs) are good targets. Overall, jobs most in demand will be in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and healthcare (Carlson, 2017, p. 4). However, a truly desirable 21st Century skill set goes beyond the traditionally dichotomizing notion of STEM or liberal arts; the most sought after and highly paid employees will have hard and soft skills, or an integration of liberal arts competencies with STEM or occupation specific skills (Carlson, 2017, p. 4). According to Lorenzo (2013), "The fastest-growing category of employment in advanced economies like the US are... jobs that require complex interactions... deep knowledge and independent judgment." Community colleges that develop integrated, cross-disciplinary curriculums will be particularly well poised to deliver equitable pathways to these jobs.

To ensure that students develop these performance competencies, colleges must also offer students practice with hands-on learning opportunities, like simulations, internships, clinical placements, and service-learning. Because community college students are often low income, programs that incorporate these opportunities alongside quick pathways to livable wages through "earn and learn" models like apprenticeships are especially attractive. And due to the rapidly changing nature of the workplace, in order to be positioned for lifelong success, students also must understand the need to be adaptable and willing to continuously upgrade skills.

Stackable credentials offer one viable method. Stackable credentials, as defined by the American Association of Community Colleges (2012), "are a sequence of multilevel, industry-recognized credentials and/or certifications ... students can earn credentials, work for some time, and then return to college for additional credentials without losing ground" (p. 21).

To live up to the ideals upon which they were founded, community colleges can build pathways to prosperity by developing integrated curriculums, offering multiple opportunities for hands-on practice, and encouraging lifelong learning. Those that do so will produce graduates who are well prepared for meaningful, long-term participation in the rapidly changing 21st century economy.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community colleges most effectively supply the type of workforce education needed to help close the middle skills gap?**

### Tomeka Cross, MS

Higher Education Consultant  
Grants and Workforce Training  
Huntsville, Alabama

At the 2017 American Association for Community College Conference, Martha Kanter, former Under Secretary of Education, made the observation, "Every state has a workforce problem." This statement alone assured me that mending the workforce

skills gap is NOT the responsibility of community colleges alone. Workforce education should be a shared responsibility! However, since the responsibility has been heavily placed on the American Community College, our community colleges have the obligation of communicating and sharing the responsibility with various community leaders, k-12 systems, policymakers, industry partners, and other stakeholders of workforce education. I believe the most effective way for community colleges to help close the middle-skills gap is to intentionally become cultures of inclusiveness.

Community colleges are pillars of workforce education and have a great opportunity to bridge the gap between the k-12 system and Industry. Community colleges can continue to collaborate with k-12 partners through dual enrollment programs. However, they must communicate the holistic purpose of dual enrollment to k-12 leaders and policymakers, which is to foster both training and early completion to help close the middle-skills gap. Once k-12 leaders understand the full intent of dual enrollment at community colleges, they could then become a partnering advocate of workforce education and a robust pipeline. While many community colleges have individual bridge programs that promote early entry and early completion, they seem to fall short of delivering a collective global awareness of the crucial role they play in workforce education.

Community leaders should also be included in the planning and promotion of workforce education. The community needs to understand the value of technical jobs and understand that not all jobs require a four-year degree.

I also believe industry partners should be more involved in curriculum development at community colleges – especially in career and technical programs – because they have the actual real-world work experience and can provide direct insight on current and future needs relative to their cluster. This initiative would afford students the necessary skills to meet their personal learning needs, as well as the requirements of the company. If industry partners played a key role in developing the curriculum, programs could be shortened, which would allow immediate entry into the workforce and provide students with the critical and immediate skills needed to perform essential job duties of the company. However, to effectively tackle this initiative, community colleges must strategically approach industries in their geographic or service area to address the prevailing middle-skills gap with local industries. Advisory boards and partnerships must be viewed as colleagues. This approach should help foster a culture of inclusiveness and in turn, generate a shared responsibility of supplying the type of workforce education needed to help close the middle-skills gap.

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*Tomeka Cross, MS, is a grants and workforce development consultant and from 2015 to 2018, served as the Director of Grants and Workforce Development at J.F. Drake State Community and Technical College in Huntsville, Alabama. She received her MS in Human Development and Resource Management from Alabama A&M University and is currently enrolled in the FSU DCCL program. Ms. Cross deems resources are only valuable when they are visible and accessible.*



## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

*In today's changing economy, we are seeing an emphasis on middle-skills jobs – those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. Middle-skills jobs make up the largest part of America's labor market, yet many key industries are unable to find enough sufficiently trained workers, resulting in a middle-skills gap. As baby boomers retire, associate's degrees and certificates have become increasingly important for finding good jobs. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.*

### Two-Year Colleges: Adapting to Help Close the Middle Skills Gap

**Mark J. Felsheim, PhD**

Vice President, Oak Creek Campus  
Milwaukee Area Technical College  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

There is no doubt that companies are scrambling to find skilled workers particularly for middle skills jobs, those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree. These jobs make up the largest part of the American labor market, according to the National Skills Coalition: <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf>.

There are several reasons for this decline, including an over emphasis on getting a four-year degree, the large number of potential retirees, and even a cutting back by many two-year colleges on some of these programs. Whatever the reasons, however, the gap is growing at an alarming rate. In the Milwaukee/Chicago region, for example, more and more employers are reporting difficulty finding the skilled workers they need. In 2014, 53% of all employers in the Milwaukee area reported having a difficult time finding workers. By 2017, that percentage had risen to 70%, with 80% of manufacturers reporting difficulty in finding qualified workers according to the most recent Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce survey.

*Students who complete the track will have at least an employability certificate when they graduate high school and be well on their way to earning a diploma or associates' degree in a high demand field.*

What can two-year colleges do to meet this growing demand? The answer is to go well beyond just adding more sections or advertising. Two-year colleges must look for new ways to collaborate with local employers, high schools, and the university system to meet this need. In Milwaukee, for example, the three largest education entities have formed an M3 ("em cubed") initiative among Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), and the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee (UWM).

Work groups have been formed among the three institutions focused on several key initiatives to increase student retention and interest in STEM-related fields. Initiatives in this area are reaching down to middle school students. M3 has also partnered with several business consortia, particularly in manufacturing, to help expose kids early to the opportunities available in these fields. Through partnerships with MPS schools like Bradley Tech and suburban schools, MATC has increased the number of high school students earning college credits while still in high school by 20% in the past four years.

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community colleges most effectively supply the type of workforce education needed to help close the middle skills gap?**

They have also recently been experimenting with Career Academies in nursing, welding, and IT to have high school students half time or full time at the college campus. Students who complete the track will have at least an employability certificate when they graduate high school and be well on their way to earning a diploma or associates' degree in a high demand field.

MATC has also partnered with Wisconsin Department of Corrections to educate students as they re-enter communities. There are currently over 200 students in this program.

Two-year colleges must also look at the way they deliver instruction. In Wisconsin, for example, the technical colleges have created career pathways that can allow a student to pick up an employability certificate with as little as one semester of training. These certificates transfer completely into one-year programs, which transfer into two-year associates and four-year bachelor's degrees. In addition, these career pathways line up with the Academic Career Pathways used by Wisconsin Public Schools.

Colleges must also look at delivering more training needed at the worksite. MATC, for example, created an innovative training program at a local manufacturer that takes their workplace current employees and trains them to be high skilled CNC operators right on site.

It is also important for two-year colleges to adapt to meet the needs of current students. Initiatives like the Guided Pathways model are reframing the question from "are students college ready?" to "are colleges student ready?" One way to do this is to rethink how we handle students who do not meet the required math or English scores. In the past, we put them in remedial classes until they could bring their skills up to meet the pre-requisites. This model has not proven very effective. Newer models pair supplemental instructions/support with program courses so students can get started on their career programs sooner. Early results from these changes are showing great promise across the country.

I can think of no other institutions that are better equipped to meet these workforce challenges than our two-year technical and community colleges. More than 100 years ago, when Milwaukee was looking to become a world leader in high skill manufacturing, community leaders knew they would need adaptive, innovative training options for people. Created in 1912, MATC has been meeting that need for over 100 years and like its sister schools across the country, it is reacting quickly to meet the high skilled training needs of today's employers.

**Dr. Mark J. Felsheim** serves as Vice President for the Oak Creek Campus of Milwaukee Area Technical College, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Dr. Felsheim earned his PhD in Educational Leadership from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has been involved in higher education, mostly at the two-year level, for over 30 years. He has lived and worked in Europe, teaching for the U.S. Army and at several two-year colleges in Wisconsin and Minnesota. His specialty includes work in student success, curriculum, workforce training, and alternative instructional delivery methods. As a first-generation college graduate who attended a community college, he has focused his career on student success through student engagement.



**QUICK TAKES  
Highlights  
from the Field**

**Rethinking the  
Mission: Community  
Colleges and  
Workforce Education**

by Tamar Jacoby

A variety of forces have put new emphasis on middle-skill jobs and the need for changes to meet workforce demand and create opportunities for workers. While community colleges face many challenges, they are the most plausible training provider able to supply workforce education on the scale needed. Five broad policy tools are explored to help states create new incentives for educators to put skills and skills training more at the center of their missions. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/2zHn5kA>

**Good Jobs That  
Pay Without a BA:  
A State-By-State  
Analysis**

by Anthony P. Carnevale,  
Jeff Strohl, and Neil  
Ridley

In conjunction with Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, the authors stress that the reported death of the middle economy is greatly exaggerated, given 30 million good jobs in the US today that pay without a BA. Since the shift from traditional blue-collar to skilled-services industries varies, this report presents a state-by-state analysis of the considerable variation in rates of growth or decline in good jobs that pay without a BA. Access this work here: <https://goodjobsdata.org>



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**Middle Skills and the At-Risk Student: The Muscatine Community College Story** (continued from page 1)

*We have some defined core values at Raymond Muscatine and when we talk and give somebody a test and interview somebody, we are interviewing them against those core values. Even though they may have made a poor decision in the past (...), if they exhibit the core values that define the culture at Raymond, we would embrace them with open arms" (Geof Bissell, Director of Operations, Raymond, Muscatine).*

**Creative Funding Solutions.** In the first cohort, students received funding from the Iowa Works Title I program. Iowa Works was also able to purchase necessary welding equipment. Because the first group began in November, much of the already limited funds had already been allocated for the year. A new cohort began in March and will receive funding through Iowa Works, Proteus, and the MCC Foundation. Proteus provides "training and health care services to farm and migrant workers in Indiana, Iowa and Nebraska" (Proteusinc.net). The MCC Foundation typically had not funded non-credit programs, but the success of students in the first cohort provided the impetus to adopt a more inclusionary approach. The training cost approximately \$1,500 per student. The Foundation has committed to supporting students without access to Title I or Proteus funds.

*Naturally, MCC has several thought-leaders in adult, at-risk, and business-oriented education, some who have genuine empathy and understanding of student situations while still finding a way to maintain high expectations.*

**Faculty and Staff Engagement.** Naturally, MCC has several thought-leaders in adult, at-risk, and business-oriented education, some who have genuine empathy and understanding of student situations while still finding a way to maintain high expectations. These students' lives were complicated: court dates, other legal obligations, medical appointments (a flu outbreak spread like wildfire through the shelter), other jobs, and family obligations. On occasion, the lead instructor and volunteers were seen at MCSA, helping students regain their motivation to continue in the program. They reminded them of the end goal. They gave them rides to the college. The instructors – one who worked with credit students and one with non-credit students – worked together in the same lab and held students accountable for their learning. They also led them on the path of learning employment habits that would become important after the training.

Because of tight class schedules, lack of transportation, and getting accustomed to full days of training, many staff contributed either home-cooked meals or money to purchase meals for lunch. Several Student Services staff, MCC retirees, and even the manager of the childcare center – who had no direct interaction with this group of students – contributed.

It's unusual to be able to track student success so quickly. After several weeks of training, students were already applying for jobs. The MCC video department created

a documentary which was premiered at a community event with many businesses and community leaders in attendance. This documentary was shared with the campus, Board members and area legislators. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnUaq\\_\\_lyyw&t=1681s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnUaq__lyyw&t=1681s)

**MCSA Staff Support.** Staff at MCSA continuously monitored and supported students in the program. I was copied on numerous communications regarding students – sharing concerns, celebrations, employment possibilities, housing, and next steps for students. This was networking and caring at its finest. For the next group, staff is considering offering more private housing opportunities within the shelter as an encouragement for students doing well in the program.

*It's unusual to be able to track student success so quickly. After several weeks of training, students were already applying for jobs.*

**Laddered Training.** The training program was created in a laddered design: Students completed the 10-hour OSHA certificate, NCRS certification, blue-print reading and math skills, and 150 hours of welding. Each step on the ladder represented a marketable skill, should the student be unable to finish the full program. This program was a non-credit training program that could easily be complemented with credit courses.

I had the chance to have lunch with students from the second group just last week. One of the students was struggling with a decision to stay in the program or accept a construction job that was being offered to him. The construction company told him he should quit the training program and come to work. He had spent many years in the construction industry already and saw that he would have limited options for advancement. By the time we finished talking, he had decided to stay in the welding program because he believed he would be more financially stable in welding. He was also eager to learn a new skill. I assured him that he would not have to repay the college if he chose differently and returned to construction. I am watching his progress closely and believe that he will make it to the finish line.

**Naomi DeWinter, EdD**, serves as president of Muscatine Community College in Muscatine, Iowa, part of Eastern Iowa's Community College District. She is a 2014 graduate of Ferris State University's Doctorate in Community College Leadership (DCCL) program and a member of the inaugural DCCL class. DeWinter previously served as Vice President of Student Affairs at North Central Michigan College in Petoskey, Michigan, and as Interim Director of Enrollment Management and Community Outreach at Oakland Community College in Waterford, Michigan. She earned her Master's degree in College Student Personnel at Eastern Michigan University. She is a Past President of the Michigan Community College Student Services Association and served as an Advisory Board Member for the Michigan Community College Student Success Center. She speaks fluent German and conversational Japanese and also co-teaches in the DCCL program with her mentor, Dr. Cameron Brunet-Koch.

