

Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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Continuing Education is the key that unlocks the opportunity for higher education to be a dominant force in upskilling the next generation of learners.

- Jeffrey Forrest

One of the most straightforward approaches to reducing workforce skills gaps is through continuing education. It also proves to be very interesting work in higher education...

- Valerie Delleville

Community Colleges and Continuing Education: Catalysts for Collaboration to Solve Labor Shortages, Prepare the Workforce of Tomorrow

John J. "Ski" Sygielski, MBA, EdD

President and CEO
HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

We are navigating new dynamics as we shift toward a post-pandemic economy with fewer available workers in almost every sector and profession. While economic forecasters and workforce development professionals were preparing for challenges as baby boomers aged out of the workforce, the pandemic has exacerbated shortages with early retirements, especially by those vulnerable to COVID-19; higher wages being paid for unskilled labor to attract workers; and relaxing of preferred skills requirements to fill industry vacancies. This 21st century phenomenon in which job openings outnumber those applying for work creates a unique set of challenges that require all sectors of our community to meet and address.

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Factors Changing the Labor Landscape

Many workers, especially those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19, have opted to retire in fear of an unhealthy environment. On another front, many employers are raising wages to attract unskilled labor to combat shortages, which has created another crisis for industries that need skilled workers. For example, convenience stores are offering wages comparable to those paid to some skilled healthcare positions. As a result, workers are reluctant to spend valuable time and money in a training program when they can make the same wages in an unskilled environment. And industries, desperate for workers of any skill level to fill their vacancies, often hire unskilled workers and use a variety of methods to fit them into the job.

Workforce Development and Continuing Education Divisions Can Leverage Untapped Resources

Before the pandemic, communities of color, high schoolers, women, re-entrants, and non-native English speakers – among others – constituted an available pool that was not widely recruited. The labor landscape has further changed as these communities not previously considered potential members of the workforce are intentionally engaged to keep our economy moving forward. This requires an understanding of a different approach for engagement and hiring. The key to successfully understanding and cultivating potential employees from untapped sources lies with community colleges with a strong, agile and innovative

workforce development division. Workforce development, at its best, is creative problem solving, which makes it an ideal solution for this new environment in which we find ourselves. There are many ways that community colleges can more fully engage this previously untapped workforce and provide them with the skills necessary to be successful.

Deliberate Approach to Teaching Foundational Skills Proves Successful

First, it is necessary to appreciate the cultural makeup of each of these communities and acknowledge that one's personal culture may differ from the workplace culture. Culture can be defined as "the attitudes and behavior characteristics of a particular social group." The position we should take as workforce development and continuing education training providers is to ensure workplace expectations are understood by all employees and applied evenly as previously untapped potential employees join the workplace environment.

At HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College, we created an opportunity to share those expectations through our STEP Academy. STEP is an acronym for "Stand up, Take action, Expect results, Put in the work." We created this program as a vehicle to expose potential employees to the world of work; specifically, our re-entrant communities. We started with simple handshakes and progressed to appropriate communication and conflict resolution, time management, and the ability to function within a team. We stressed conduct as well as the norms of the work environment.

Students have an opportunity to explore career choices and learn about career programs that are alternatives to college degrees.

The STEP Academy has been highly successful, so much so that we made a few adjustments and introduced the program to our 65 public high school partners. We work with high school students who are undecided on a course of future action as they enter their senior year, many of whom have little or no work experience. We've added a few additional components to the program, such as OSHA 10, CPR, and First Aid, which have proven to be of immediate value. Students have an opportunity to explore career choices and learn about career programs that are alternatives to college degrees. Additionally, we help them create portfolios with resumés, cover letters, LinkedIn profiles, and thank-you letters for the businesses they contact. We have also aligned with our academic programs so that the STEP Academy carries three college credits. Many superintendents in the school districts of our *(continued on page 4)*

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Today's work environment can be characterized as one of constant change, driven in part by global shifts which have redefined which types of skills and credentials employers need. As a result, community colleges are reassessing approaches to help reduce workforce skills gaps through continuing education. Now more than ever, community college continuing education divisions are providing valuable market-responsive learning opportunities that students, professionals, and employers need. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Leslie Neal, MS

Instructor and Department Chair,
Communication Studies and World Languages
Montcalm Community College
Sidney, Michigan

In September of 2020, the state of Michigan was abuzz with talk about the Futures for Frontliners, a program designed to offset the cost of college for eligible Michiganders. The Michigan Governor described the initiative as a "thank you" to Michigan residents for their job dedication during the onset of the pandemic. Before local community colleges could pinch themselves to ensure this opportunity was real, the state announced an additional program and the governor signed bills to provide additional funding for people seeking a post-secondary education or skill trade. This program, known as Michigan Reconnect, provides eligible Michigan residents an opportunity to pursue an associate degree or certificate at any Michigan public community college.

Community colleges across the state jumped at the chance to open their doors to a new population of prospective students. With this influx of students, however, colleges have a responsibility to ensure their programs are up to date with the current needs of the ever-evolving workforce. There are a few ways that leaders of community colleges can make certain that their programs remain relevant and agile.

Connection to industry. When industries feel connected to your institution, this relationship can create mutual obligation, allowing for both parties to update one another when new needs and trends arise. This connection requires respect of each other's roles; industry trusting colleges to teach, and colleges trusting that industry will open their doors to graduates.

Reflection followed by intentional action. Community college leaders must consistently consider past, present, and future to safeguard product improvement. Taking the necessary steps to look for underlying causes of any issues and concerns within both industry and programming, then implementing targeted modifications is imperative to guaranteeing relevancy rather than stagnation.

Enable others to act. While leaders have a responsibility to ensure their team understands the vision, it is vital to create a confident and competent team, trusting members of the team to not only recognize areas for improvement, but pushing them to take initiative when a need arises. One key to adaptability is timing. Having a team that is trustworthy can be the difference between being agile and being inept.

Leaders who strive to maintain relevancy must be consistently intentional as they adapt to the changing demands of workforce. As technology continues to take claim of workforce positions, community colleges must lean into up-and-coming trends by actively listening to industry requests and making efforts to meet the needs of the future. Though most in academia are not skilled at predicting the future, we are skilled at reviewing trends and data that can help guide decisions – a practice that can assure relevancy and agility.



Leslie Neal, MS, serves as a full-time instructor and department chair of Communication Studies and World Languages for Montcalm Community College in Sidney, Michigan. Leslie earned her Masters degree in the field of Communication Studies from Grand Valley State University. She sits on various community and professional boards and is currently enrolled as a member of Cohort 11, working toward her doctorate in the DCCL program at Ferris State University.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can leaders of community college continuing education divisions best help their institutions stay relevant and quickly adapt to constantly evolving workforce needs?

Aaron N. Salas, MEd

Executive Director of First Year Experience
Lone Star College
Houston, Texas

The COVID pandemic continues to impact community colleges across the United States along with the communities and businesses they serve. While this required college leaders to focus on enhancing online and virtual classes and student services, business leaders have also faced similar challenges with technology as well as labor shortages in part due to candidates lacking skills needed to work effectively in a new "normal." Additionally, because of severe labor shortages, employers have downskilled requirements in job postings, and are offering more sign-on bonuses, higher starting salaries, and more on-the-job training (Levanon, 2021). While the allure of higher salaries may attract many candidates, downskilling requires employers to loosen requirements to lure potential employees, requiring additional training to ensure that employee obtain the skills needed to meet the needs of a constantly changing work environment (Lehner, 2018).

This offers community colleges the opportunity to offer valuable market-responsive learning opportunities focused on enhancing skills employees needed to enter the workforce. Through continuing education programs, colleges can offer single courses or short customized programs that can help businesses train existing and potential employees. The Lone Star Corporate College has created global partnerships with many Houston-based corporations to provide trainings and certifications covering many industries. This year, the Lone Star Corporate College and RigUp partnered to provide free training for students interested in joining the growing renewable energy industry. Through this training, students will learn the basics of installing utility scale solar racking and modular equipment, and will earn OSHA 10 certification (Lone Star College, 2021). Partnerships like this benefit colleges by not only attracting new students but can also help college leaders to remain aware of labor market trends.

Collaborations with continuing education programs can also ensure faculty and student advisors have up to date data and resources for students completing certificate and degree programs as well. In the First Year Experience department at LSC, I have worked with the Division of External and Employer Relations to provide students in our FYE course career exploration assessments and resources, including job postings, to create awareness of the many local careers they can prepare for at LSC.

Community college leaders must take advantage of the opportunities that a shifting labor market has provided to offer continuing education training to ensure our students are prepared for existing and future jobs opportunities. With companies recovering from the pandemic and hiring new workers, it's important for continuing education leaders to explore new partnerships and utilize labor market data to address gaps in skills needed to compete in today's workforce. Collaborations with college administrators and faculty can help to enhance existing programs and develop new programs that will attract students and businesses alike.

Aaron N. Salas, MEd has worked in higher education for over 15 years and currently serves at the Executive Director of First Year Experience at Lone Star College. Salas earned his MEd from the University of Houston and is currently enrolled in the Ferris State University DCCL program as a member of the first Texas Cohort. His research interests include a focus on improving the access and retention of Latino Male higher education students.



NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Today's work environment can be characterized as one of constant change, driven in part by global shifts which have redefined which types of skills and credentials employers need. As a result, community colleges are reassessing approaches to help reduce workforce skills gaps through continuing education. Now more than ever, community college continuing education divisions are providing valuable market-responsive learning opportunities that students, professionals, and employers need. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Leadership and the Continuing Education Commitment

Marguerite Cotto, MS

Vice President for Lifelong & Professional Learning
Northwestern Michigan College
Traverse City, Michigan

Across the nation, communities and their community colleges are focusing attention on continuing education (CE) offerings with an urgency matching every aspect of the economic and social changes of this extraordinary moment. Leaders of the continuum of programs and services that populate continuing education are increasingly called upon to energize strategic workforce priorities, even as their areas are often understaffed or their impact only partially recognized as integral to the community college mission. In the first part of this conversation (September 2021 issue of Perspectives), President Glenn Cerny of Schoolcraft College (MI) brought into focus a values-based perspective to our mission in workforce preparation. Underscoring this, Dr. Rebecca Lake's recommendations of structure and practice-level changes sketched a forward view of internal organizational shifts geared toward improving the flexibility and effectiveness we desire and the results our constituents need.

Leaders of the continuum of programs and services that populate continuing education are increasingly called upon to energize strategic workforce priorities...

Between the intention of the mission and the aspirations of a more adaptive institutional structure, CE leaders and their teams directly experience the tension between strategic expectations and operational results. For them, employer pressure and learner needs push up against time, timing, competing priorities and resources, technology, effectiveness, internal system limits, and much more. The context for the CE leader's contributions to a community college's responsiveness is dependent on agreement with stakeholders about the scope of solutions and alignment among the internal systems that allow these to be developed and delivered effectively.

Agreement at the executive and board levels:

- 1) *Is the commitment to 'workforce responses' clear inside and outside the College?* In acknowledging the impossibility of being everything to everyone, the question of for whom we will be effective and agile is more than a matter of development time, capacity to invest or co-invest in training and teaching solutions, or scale of impact. Have we set reasonable boundaries for the solutions we are in the best position to provide? Do our solutions contribute to companion priorities such as balancing student debt, engaging underserved populations, and facilitating employment readiness? Do we have a simple framework that communicates our efforts – and our progress – internally and to our stakeholders? Have we prepared Trustees and senior leadership to be comfortable in the public conversations surrounding the urgency of workforce issues?
- 2) *Is collaboration for CE agreed upon by the whole organization?* CE leaders and their teams cannot succeed in a vacuum. Does governance

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facilitate cross-functional or cross-area solutions that can most benefit these initiatives? Is it easy to tap faculty and staff? Is there support for leveraging distinctive and high-value program content, and to establish innovative and competitive pricing models? Are there opportunities to share models for non-credit to credit transfer or the other way around?


- 3) *Are resources available for strategic workforce responses that fall outside the annual budget?* Is there a meaningful reserve fund that allows investment in unforeseen requirements? Is there a clear pathway that enables co-investment by employers or other collaborators?

Alignment to succeed at the leader's level:

- 1) *Do CE leaders have the opportunity to clarify, set, and share terminology and scope of action with key governance units in order to establish a straightforward and consistent view to the external community?* Continuing Education units can be hamstrung by their own terms (Continuing? Lifelong? Training? Development?), and by a history of units that typically fall outside the structures of governance such as curriculum committees or planning and budget councils. Leaders in this role have an opportunity to close the organizational engagement gap by leveraging shared governance opportunities, providing regular reporting at the Board level, and having active engagement with both donors and alumni.
- 2) *Do these leaders work with Institutional Research to collaborate on regional employability data?* Disjunction in data trending forced by 2020 conditions will require additional ground-truthing and contextualizing of employer needs as well as worker qualifications. Localized data dashboards that serve these interests will need the voice of CE leaders as key informants as well as data users.
- 3) *Do these leaders have support – and make time – for research, reflection, and participation in projects that maintain the responsive 'edge' of CE?* Competitive advantage can only function at the current breakneck pace for a limited time. Who coaches the coach? Are presidents attentive for opportunities to encourage sabbatical projects or discovery activities that refresh the energy and imagination these leaders require?

As with so much of the community college story, we will use a complex moment to get ready for the next chapter, one focused on innovation in continuing education for workforce development, which alongside 'lifelong learning,' serve as endcaps to our role as 'comprehensive.' I, for one, will be excited to see what happens next!

Marguerite Cotto serves as Vice President for Lifelong & Professional Learning at Northwestern Michigan College (NMC), a portfolio designed to foster collaborative and innovative programs in both credit and non-credit formats. During her 40-year career at NMC, she has championed seemingly far-flung initiatives: world languages, agricultural sciences, aviation, the community college baccalaureate, life-long learning, and youth enrichment – all connected by her passionate commitment to the community college mission. Her work includes establishing the NMC Great Lakes Water Studies Institute; implementing training programs in construction management and marine surveying delivered in partnership with the Yellow River Conservancy Technical Institute in Kaifeng, China; leading the NMC University Center through 25 years of post-associate degree delivery to the region. Marguerite is a graduate of the University of Puerto Rico with a degree in Agronomy, and holds a MS degree in Agricultural and Extension Education from Michigan State University. She will be taking on the role of emeritus in December 2021.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

The State of Continuing Education 2021: Exposing the Modern Learner Engagement Gap

by Modern Campus

This survey looked at the effects of the pandemic on U.S. and Canadian continuing education providers, examining whether current institutions and technologies were meeting students' needs and supporting continuing education providers. Research identified areas where institutions are suffering from learner engagement gaps, highlighted areas where they're working to address that gap, and those where they might not see the opportunity. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3olgQ9u>

Value of Community College Short-Term Credentials

by A. Beer, K. Brown, and J. Juskiewicz

This report aims to fill a gap in the existing research by analyzing student data from community college short-term programs, including certificate programs and industry-recognized credentials. ACCT collected data and interviewed leaders from three statewide community college systems. Findings demonstrate that many employer-aligned, short-term programs can lead to increased wages and a higher quality of life for students after completion. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3Bq4aHX>

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EDITORIAL STAFF

Jeanne Bonner, PhD, Editor
Mara Jevera Fulmer, EdD, MFA, Design & Production Editor

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Community Colleges and Continuing Education... (continued from page 1)

high school partners are finding value in this program as they acknowledge that all students who graduate do not go immediately into college. The STEP Academy prepares those students for the world of work.

Apprenticeships Offer Pathway to Acquiring Skilled Workers

To fill the immediate needs of employers and under-skilled workers, we have also focused our efforts on apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. These programs give the participants the opportunity to "earn while you learn," which is a key component when seeking to integrate under-resourced communities into the workforce. The combination of on-the-job learning, coupled with required technical instruction from a recognized institute or organization, is ideal for bending the learning curve that job seekers often face when applying for new opportunities. Additionally, being paid while you learn allows workers to support their families and themselves while receiving the necessary training.

There are literally hundreds of recognized apprenticeship programs within the U.S. Department of Labor, with additional opportunities being added each year. Apprenticeships can be a pathway for businesses in need of new talent, but find they are only attracting candidates with little or no recognized skills. Additionally, with the aging workforce retiring, apprenticeships are an opportunity to tap the seasoned veterans within a company to pass on their hard-earned knowledge to the apprentice to ensure the company can move forward in the same direction with new talent.

The combination of on-the-job learning, coupled with required technical instruction from a recognized institute or organization, is ideal for bending the learning curve that job seekers often face when applying for new opportunities.

Creative Approach Brings Training to Potential Workers

Under-resourced communities need thoughtful and intentional approaches when bringing them to employment opportunities. We at HACC are approaching our school districts with an opportunity to engage students and their parents in short-term training cohorts for entry-level jobs in readily accessible locations. Other factors to consider when we introduce workforce development opportunities to diverse communities are issues of transportation and childcare. HACC recognized the challenge transportation brings to a training endeavor. We also recognized that members of our poorly resourced communities, even though often underemployed, must still work.

To increase the potential for successful completion, we chose a different option to provide training: We hold it on the school grounds in the late afternoon or early evening. This eliminates some of the transportation and childcare issues, while ensuring access for those who have to work during the daytime. Although HACC does not provide specific support for transportation and childcare, we connect students with available community resources such as nonprofits and government agencies that can assist with these challenges.

'We're in This Together' and Collaboration Can Move the Needle

None of these solutions work as a stand-alone resource.

Nor can the decline in the workforce be blamed on any one sector – business and industry, educators, or the community. And while each sector has a significant role to play, we will not move past this critical point without all of us cooperating and being willing to contribute necessary resources and concerted effort toward resolving the problem. Building coalitions across sectors to solve economic problems is taking root in significant ways throughout HACC's 11-county service region in Central Pennsylvania. Several organizations, such as those in health care, building contractors, and others in the business community, are contributing time and financial resources to offer information and opportunity.

None of these solutions work as a stand-alone resource. Nor can the decline in the workforce be blamed on any one sector - business and industry, educators, or the community

Solutions Developed Now Have Long-Term Application

Despite the challenges we face as we transition toward a post-pandemic period, the innovative solutions, partnerships, and creative opportunities that we are developing, along with the focus on additional short-term training and skills development, will have long-term application. As wages increase so will the quality of life for many in our workforce.

In Central Pennsylvania, I believe the focus on a trained workforce will allow our business and industry sectors to transition as new technologies are added to the workplace. This approach can be applied beyond HACC as other community colleges leverage their workforce development and continuing education divisions to be catalysts in developing solutions to labor shortages and a decline of skilled workers. A well-trained workforce will be better positioned to leverage robotics, artificial intelligence, and new manufacturing technologies, while benefitting from a higher standard of living. While we in Central Pennsylvania and across the country certainly are experiencing the challenges of today, we should be confident that as we meet these challenges together, we pave the way for increased opportunities for our entire regions.

John J. "Ski" Sygielski, MBA, EdD, became the seventh president and CEO of HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College, in July 2011. His previous appointments include president of Mt. Hood Community College in Gresham, Oregon, and president of Lord Fairfax Community College in Middletown, Virginia. He began his professional career as a teacher in a Chicago inner city school, followed by a stint as a corporate trainer for two Fortune 500 companies.

He transitioned to a community college career at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, where he began his community college administration and college teaching career. Sygielski is a current member and past chairman of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) Board of Directors and served on the AACCC's 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. He is the former chair of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges Board of Directors. Sygielski also serves on several local, regional, and national higher education advisory committees. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Sygielski is the only member of his working-class family to graduate from college earning bachelor, two master and doctorate degrees, including an honorary associate degree from a community college.

