

THE HECHINGER REPORT

NEWS

Business partnerships with community colleges help funnel workers into better jobs

Companies needing better-skilled workers also benefit from programs that teach those specific skills

by OLIVIA SANCHEZ July 2, 2021

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When Roma Ouk moved from Southern California to Scottsdale, Arizona, to get a fresh start, he decided to go back to school. The first thing he had to do was scrape together \$270 and fill out an [eight-question assessment online](#).

When he passed with a perfect score, he got into a three-credit boot camp at Mesa Community College run in partnership with Boeing, the aerospace giant.

The nine-day, 36-hour course, taught by Boeing employees, teaches students how to assemble, modify, repair and test the cables and other equipment that create the “central nervous system” of Boeing’s airplanes, helicopters and drones.

Ouk, 33, emerged with an industry-recognized credential known as acable and wire harness assembly certification and an earning potential about 15 percent above what he was making as nurse’s assistant in his hometown of Long Beach, California.

The Washington Post

This story also appeared in [The Washington Post](#)

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Roma Ouk, 33, enrolled in the wire harness assembly boot camp at Mesa Community College in Arizona, a partnership with Boeing, and later was hired by General Dynamics, an aerospace and defense company, as a senior manufacturing and production operator. Credit: Brandon Sullivan for The

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Mesa Community College’s partnership with Boeing is one of several models that could be replicated if a **bipartisan bill** to help finance community college workforce training for short-term credentials makes it through Congress.

The Assisting Community Colleges in Educating Skilled Students to Careers Act — or **ACCESS to Careers Act** — is designed to increase the number of students who earn these types of credentials and the number of colleges meeting the needs of local employers. It could provide states with up to \$2.5 million a year for up to four years to develop policies around this type of workforce training and provide community colleges with grants of up to \$1.5 million each to carry out the programs. Its sponsors, Sens. Todd Young, a Republican from Indiana, and Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, are both staunch advocates of short-term workforce training programs; they reintroduced the bill in May, after a February 2020 version languished without success.

The combination of students changing the way they consume postsecondary education and businesses desperate for skilled employees has led to a new wave of strategic business partnerships — with or without the proposed federal grants. Rachel Vilsack, a senior fellow at the National Skills Coalition, said she’s seen an increase in partnerships that allow businesses to signal their needs and work directly with community colleges to meet them. The increase has also been sped up by the pandemic, she said.

“These partnerships have become the real-time data source that are creating that skilled pipeline and pathway of workers to make this economic recovery better and faster and more inclusive,” Vilsack said.

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Mesa Community College offers a wire harness assembly boot camp taught by Boeing employees. Anyone who passes a short online assessment can enroll, and in-state students who pass the course receive a partial refund from the college. Credit: Brandon Sullivan for The Hechinger Report

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In New York City, the Harvard Business School Club of New York and the regional healthcare groups Weill Cornell Medicine and Mount Sinai Health System have partnered with LaGuardia Community College in Queens on a program that trains students in medical billing. At **more than 200 colleges** in the United States, Amazon Web Services has established business partnerships to train students in cloud computing technology. A host of other programs, including some that use virtual reality headsets to train students, are cropping up across the country.

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The research on short-term credential programs is mixed. Advocates praise their ability to **provide quick training to adults who don't have the time or resources** to seek longer degrees, but opponents worry about tracking students of color, low-income students and women into jobs with little upward mobility and **lower wages than their counterparts**. Many experts believe that if the short-term programs are designed in tandem with businesses to address specific needs in the workforce, they lead to better success for the students.

LaGuardia's nine-credit medical billing program has a completion rate of almost 90 percent, and about 80 percent of the students who complete the program are hired into medical billing or equivalent jobs at an average starting wage of \$39,500, according to data provided by the college.

It's hard to say how many other programs have had the same level of success placing students in jobs, because records are not widely kept.

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“I think employers should have some skin in the game. And I think especially the big corporations that have a lot of money, they should have a lot of skin in the game.”

Wesley Whistle, senior policy advisor, New America think tank

In pre-pandemic times, Ouk’s completion of the wire harness assembly certificate would have landed him an interview for a full-time job at Boeing; it led to job offers for about 87 percent of students who applied before March 2020, the college said. But the aerospace industry is still struggling under the weight of COVID-19 disruptions, and hiring has stalled indefinitely.

Wesley Whistle, a senior policy adviser at the progressive think tank New America, said Kaine and Young’s proposal for investment in workforce training is reminiscent of the [Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training](#) program that Congress established to help the country recover from the 2008 recession. And while any support for community colleges is good, Whistle said, he believes employers ought to invest directly in these programs because they stand to benefit from them.

“I think employers should have some skin in the game,” he said. “And I think especially the big corporations that have a lot of money, they should have a lot of skin in the game.”

Jordan Tyler, a manufacturing manager at Boeing, said the company has been hiring some students from the Mesa Community College program as contractors and will resume interviews for full-time

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Without the pipeline straight to a job at Boeing, Ouk tried his luck at other manufacturing companies in the area. He was hired by General Dynamics, an aerospace and defense company, as a senior manufacturing and production operator, where he will be soldering and desoldering military defense equipment when he starts in early July. He said he will be able to use his wire harness assembly skills periodically in the new role.

Related: [To those who lost jobs in the pandemic, workforce retraining can be baffling](#)

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A partnership between Mesa Community College and Boeing equips students with wire harness assembly skills to prepare them for jobs. Before the pandemic, Boeing offered jobs to about 87 percent of Mesa Community College boot camp graduates, but guaranteed interviews for successful

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Community colleges partnering with businesses is not new, said Rita T. Karam, a senior policy researcher at the Rand Corporation, but the nature of the relationships is shifting and in many cases becoming more focused on developing career pathways.

Colleges often open their doors for job fairs with local industry partners or invite professionals from different fields to speak to classes. And most career and technical programs are guided by an advisory board combining faculty and leaders from the relevant local field. Though important, she said, these types of business partnerships are piecemeal measures.

“A community college might tell you, ‘We have 1,000 partnerships,’ and they might actually have 1,000 partnerships, but those are loosely coupled,” Karam said. “Like, your faculty knows this business, the dean knows this other business, career services might know other businesses for specific activities — important activities, but they are specific activities that might not lead to this transformational change.”

Martha Parham, a spokesperson for the American Association of Community Colleges, said the shift might reflect the changing way that students are consuming higher education: “It’s not necessarily linear.”

She said students are veering from the four-year path toward a model where they learn a skill or get a credential, go out into the workforce and then come back later to pursue a degree or further advance their workplace skills.

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Maureen Conway, executive director of the Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program, said community colleges represent untapped potential for businesses looking to build a well-equipped workforce.

Because community colleges often enroll students from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds, she said, these business partnerships can help companies hire people who will diversify their workforce. Companies can also take advantage of the opportunity to get workers with the skill sets they need without the cost of training them.

States could get up to \$2.5 million a year to develop policies around workforce training and community colleges up to \$1.5 million each to carry out the programs, if a bipartisan bill passes in Congress

She said colleges should be encouraged to ask questions of companies about employment practices, so they are not only creating skilled workers, but are also sending them into good jobs “where they can support themselves and live with dignity.”

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When Jonathan Aguirre, 37, decided to return to school in early 2019 after nearly two decades of working as a plumber and, more recently, picking up gigs for TaskRabbit, he said he asked himself, “What’s hot right now?”

A resident of Van Nuys, California, Aguirre perused the websites of nearby community colleges and discovered some were offering an Amazon Web Services program in **cloud computing**, which gives users access to computer power, storage and database services over the internet without relying on a traditional physical data center in a home or office.

Aguirre enrolled at Los Angeles Mission College, part of a consortium of community colleges in Southern California offering the short-term credential program in cloud computing.

Having gone on to earn an associate degree in cybersecurity, Aguirre is now dreaming up app security projects with his cybersecurity club while searching for a job in the field. He was making between \$40,000 and \$50,000 annually with the plumbers’ union — roughly the starting wage for many of the tech jobs he’s looking at now.

But he expects his earning potential to grow as he advances in the field, and as it does, he said he hopes to help support his mother and his son, who took a cloud computing class at his high school after Aguirre completed his coursework. Aguirre’s son graduated from high school in early June.

Patricia Ramos, the dean of workforce and economic development at Santa Monica College, said that

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The college began working with Amazon to develop a credit-bearing curriculum for cloud computing in 2017, and received a \$15,000 boost from Amazon at the outset, Ramos said. Amazon said the money wasn't technically a grant so it's not renewable, and a spokesperson declined to comment on whether other partner schools received startup money.

The college's existing instructors were trained to teach the course through an educational arm of Amazon, and the 15-unit program began about a year later.

“With Amazon “promoting more businesses to get onto their platform, they need to ensure that there’s a skilled workforce out there for businesses to be able to hire from.”

Patricia Ramos, dean of workforce and economic development, Santa Monica College

At Santa Monica College and the 18 other schools in the region that offer the program, the goal isn't to get every student who completes the program a job at Amazon, Ramos said, but to equip students to work at any companies that use Amazon Web Services and the cloud.

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Mesa Community College offers a three-credit wire harness assembly boot camp taught by Boeing employees. Before the pandemic, students who passed the course landed interviews with Boeing, but hiring by the company has stalled indefinitely. Credit: Brandon Sullivan for The Hechinger Report

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ensure that there's a skilled workforce out there for businesses to be able to hire from.”

Kim Majerus, who leads Amazon Web Services' education and government initiatives, said building technical talent through associate or certificate programs is critical for the company.

“These partnerships have become the real-time data source that are creating that skilled pipeline and pathway of workers to make this economic recovery better and faster and more inclusive.”

Rachel Vilsack, senior fellow, National Skills Coalition

And students who might not otherwise get this training or “upskilling” — such as those who live near community colleges in underserved rural areas or cities — can also benefit, she said.

Jennifer Worth, the senior vice president for workforce and economic development at the American Association of Community Colleges, said the best of these programs work because they equip students with skills that are portable and transferable. For her, it's a red flag if a program is so specialized that it prepares students only for a job at one company.

“A really innovative community college and industry partnership would think not just about servicing the one employer only, but actually the wider world,” Worth said.

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