

Business partnerships with community colleges help funnel workers into jobs

By Olivia Sanchez

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When Roma Ouk moved from Southern California to Scottsdale, Ariz., 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 and an earning potential about 15 percent above what he was making as a nurse’s assistant in his hometown of Long Beach, Calif.

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. The bill was reintroduced in May by Sens. Todd C. Young (R-Ind.) and Tim Kaine (D-Va.) 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.

Anticipated changes to the future of work, she added, have come faster than expected, and colleges and businesses have no choice but to adapt.

In New York City, the Harvard Business School Club of New York and regional health-care 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.

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.

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. Ouk was eventually 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. He said he will be able to use his wire harness assembly skills periodically in the new role.

Community colleges partnering with businesses is not new, said Rita T. Karam, a senior policy researcher at the Rand Corp., but the nature of the relationships is shifting and in many cases becoming more focused on developing career pathways, rather than on piecemeal, often random personal connections with local businesses.

Martha Parham, a spokeswoman 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.

Maureen Conway, executive director of the Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program, said community colleges represent untapped potential. Because they often enroll students from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds, she said, these business partnerships can help companies diversify the workforce. Companies can also take advantage of the opportunity to get workers with the skill sets they need without the cost of training them.

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, Calif., 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 cloud computing.

Having gone on to earn an associate's degree in cybersecurity, Aguirre is now searching for a job. He was making between \$40,000 and \$50,000 with the plumbers' union — roughly the starting wage for many tech jobs he's looking at now — but expects his earning potential to grow as he advances in the field.

Patricia Ramos, the dean of workforce and economic development at Santa Monica College in Santa Monica, Calif., said that as the region became a breeding ground for tech start-ups over the past few decades, college leaders wondered how they could create better inroads into the job market.

The college began working with Amazon to develop a curriculum for cloud computing in 2017 with a \$15,000 boost from Amazon, 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 start-up money.

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

At Santa Monica College and the 18 other schools in the region that offer the program, the goal is to equip students to work at any companies that use Amazon Web Services and the cloud, not necessarily to prepare them for jobs with Amazon.

Ramos thinks it's still a beneficial setup for Amazon, because, she said, "as they are 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."

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

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 transferrable.

"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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