

Creating Credentials of Value: Five Recommendations for Community College Leaders



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Workforce Development in Community and Technical Colleges

How do we prepare learners for high-wage, high-demand careers? Answering this question is more important than ever, given stagnating earnings and declining labor force participation among workers without bachelor's degrees.² With more than one thousand community and technical colleges³ across the United States, they are the only institutions that operate at sufficient scale to prepare millions of students for careers in high-demand occupations. Yet they have mixed records of success. Less than one third of community college students go on to earn a credential. And those who do beat these odds often struggle to become employed in high-wage jobs.⁴

Research on community college student outcomes has traditionally focused on understanding the reasons that so few students complete degrees and the effectiveness of interventions meant to address low completion rates.⁵ We know much less about why community college students who do make it to the finish line seldom earn credentials of value—that is, credentials worth at least \$45,000 to \$50,000 in annual

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² Nunn et al. (2019). Labor force participation among male workers ages 25 to 34 without bachelor's degrees has increased since the COVID-19 recession but continues on a downward trend overall. For women of the same age without bachelor's degrees, labor force participation has risen (Fry et al., 2024). In addition, since the COVID-19 recession, there has been pronounced wage growth among workers without a bachelor's degree, leading to a compression of the wage differential between workers with and without bachelor's degrees (Autor et al., 2024). However, wage inequality remains high.

³ Hereafter, we use the term "community colleges" to refer to both community and technical colleges.

⁴ Holzer and Baum (2017).

⁵ See Bettinger and Feygin (2025).

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salary.⁶ This brief shares recommendations for increasing the number of students who earn credentials of value based on the research described in our *Creating Credentials of Value in Community Colleges* series (see inset for more information). We interviewed leaders at 35 colleges to learn more about their practices and begin to understand why some colleges are more successful than others at producing credentials of value. Among the 35 colleges, we spoke to leaders from 25 **excelling** colleges and 10 **aspiring** colleges. Excelling colleges are relatively successful at producing credentials of value, whereas aspiring colleges are relatively less successful. Based on the study findings, we offer five recommendations for college leaders to consider.

The study findings on which the recommendations are based reflect the priorities and perspectives of the leaders we interviewed; they may not capture colleges' full range of strategies and approaches. Further, the results should not be interpreted as causal but, rather, as a starting point for understanding some of the practices of community colleges that may be associated with successful outcomes for students.

METHODS

Using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and the American Community Survey, we identified workforce credential completion rates and average earnings for all fields of study at all public community and technical colleges in the United States from 2011 to 2021. Using these data, we created an index that allowed us to rank colleges on the basis of their relative success at producing credentials of value and used these rankings to identify colleges for further qualitative study to better understand why some community colleges are more successful than others. We examined community and contextual factors associated with producing more credentials of value. This brief draws on findings from these analyses and from interviews with leaders at 35 colleges—including 25 colleges that are relatively successful at producing credentials of value (*excelling* colleges) and 10 colleges that were less successful at producing credentials of value (*aspiring* colleges).

What We Learned About High-Performing Community Colleges

We looked at differences in practices in three categories based on a framework described by Rutschow et al. (2024): occupational skills training, employer involvement, and support services and advising. We found the following:

- Although nearly all colleges adapted their programs to meet workforce needs, excelling colleges distinguished themselves through deliberate efforts to align program offerings with jobs that are in demand in the local economy and that pay family-sustaining wages. Further, they integrated an explicit focus on career readiness in all facets of training.

⁶ In this brief, “value” refers specifically to wages. There are many ways to value credentials, and value may mean different things to different individuals. Workers may take into account other aspects of jobs when determining value, such as benefits and job satisfaction.

- Being responsive to local industry needs was a dominant theme across interviews, with leaders at nearly all colleges reporting using advisory boards to inform program development. However, leaders from excelling colleges described deeper two-way relationships with employers. College leaders and employers had regular touchpoints beyond statutory meetings, with employers codeveloping programs, providing input on decisions about equipment, and participating in reverse job fairs and other career exploration activities.
- Across all colleges in the study, there was a shared emphasis on helping students address academic challenges, prepare for employment, and meet basic needs. Leaders from excelling colleges described a broader range of advising supports, although many practices were common in all colleges and differences were often incremental rather than foundational.

Practice Recommendations

In the sections that follow, we offer five recommendations for college leaders to consider when making decisions about how community colleges prepare students for the workforce. In a separate brief, we provide policy recommendations for state and federal policymakers.

Recommendation 1: Align Program Offerings With Job Availability and Job Quality

Colleges must regularly weigh which programs to offer and what to include in the curriculum to meet their graduates' needs for jobs and industries' need for skilled and credentialed workers. The local economy and employer needs were the most commonly cited drivers of programmatic decisions for both excelling and aspiring colleges, but leaders from excelling colleges were more likely to describe deliberate efforts to align program offerings with jobs that are in demand in the local economy and that pay family-sustaining wages. Nevertheless, few colleges discussed using labor market information to drive decisions about programming. College leaders may consider how they make decisions about which programs to offer and whether there are opportunities for them to better align program offerings with the local economy. To make these judgments, they may want to use data from varied sources, such as federal labor market information and real-time labor market data providers, local economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, workforce boards and commissions, and, most important, direct and sustained engagement with employers.

We partner quite closely with employers to deliver training that meets their needs. Sometimes that training is a version of the open enrollment course or courses. Sometimes it's unique and different. Again, we sort of follow their lead in terms of what they're looking for and what they need.

– Representative from an excelling college

Recommendation 2: Engage With Employers More Often and More Deeply

Sustained engagement with employers provides college leaders with critical information about the skills that employers are looking for in job candidates and provides a venue to discuss rapidly evolving industry talent needs. Although nearly all colleges used advisory boards (required for Perkins V funding), leaders from excelling colleges described deeper two-way relationships with employers. College leaders and employers had regular touchpoints beyond statutory meetings, with employers codeveloping programs, providing input on decisions about equipment, and participating in reverse job fairs and other career exploration activities. College leaders may consider reviewing how they partner with employers to ensure meaningful engagement that supports the alignment between college offerings and industry needs. Some questions they might ask as part of a self-assessment include the following: For each program, does my college have opportunities to meet with employers annually, or are there more frequent touchpoints throughout the year? Do our advisory groups and other employer interactions include multiple employers who are representative of local industry and of different sizes and industry subsectors? Do students have regular interaction with employers, such as through hands-on work-based learning experiences and career exposure readiness opportunities? Do we have structured processes for eliciting employer feedback and adjusting programs on the basis of this feedback? Do we have any standardized frameworks, processes, and resources available to support consistent and sustained engagement across colleges and programs?

Where we've gotten much better is [understanding] employers' needs. We also have become better in discussing with them and shaping their questions better as we're kind of codeveloping curricular change, looking at really refining what the skills are that an individual needs.

– Representative from an

Recommendation 3: Offer High-Quality and Varied Work-Based Learning Experiences

Work-based learning opportunities can help students prepare for all aspects of work by not only honing their technical skills but also learning many of the essential skills (also referred to “durable” or “employability” skills) that are needed for success in the workplace, such as timeliness, communication, problem solving ability, adaptability, and professionalism. Leaders from both excelling and aspiring colleges described offering internships and apprenticeships to build students' technical and essential skills, but excelling colleges offered a wider portfolio, such as site visits, co-ops, service learning, and practicums. College leaders may consider opportunities to increase access to work-based learning experiences, ensuring that all students have meaningful opportunities to interface directly with employers and careers as part of their educational program.

I think that's where they start to understand what those essential skills are, what it means to show up, what it means to show up prepared, what the dress code is, it's those kinds of things that are sort of, we take for granted.

– Representative from an excelling college

Recommendation 4: Integrate Career Readiness Into All Facets of Education and Training

Employers expect that their employees have not only the technical skills required of their jobs but also the essential skills required for success in the workplace. There are many opportunities for colleges to integrate an explicit focus on career readiness and employability skills in all facets of training, in addition to work-based learning. Leaders from excelling colleges more often reported that they require stand-alone job-preparation courses or embedded “work ethic” and employability skills across courses; one college even provides employers with retraining guarantees if graduates are not fully job ready. College leaders can consider how to increase opportunities for students to become career ready through both stand-alone and embedded opportunities. Further, college leaders can consider how to include employer leadership in designing these opportunities to ensure that they best meet employers’ needs and signal industry-specific contexts of employability skills on the job.

We also use [employers] to provide input to our students for mock interviews to get them more trained. Many of our students have never had a job, much less an interview, so they oftentimes collaborate with our programs to provide those opportunities for mock interviews. . . . So, their contributions are quite wide.

– Representative from an excelling college

Recommendation 5: Provide Robust Student Supports, Including Academic Advising and Wraparound Support

Leaders from excelling colleges described a more robust approach to academic advising than leaders from aspiring colleges. They described their advising system as multilayered, involving academic counselors and student success advisors. These roles collectively supported students with academic challenges, skill building, and service navigation. Advising was portrayed as highly accessible, with information delivered through a range of channels to ensure that students knew where to go for help. Leaders at another excelling college described the role of career pathway navigators, who supported students by guiding them through credit for prior learning, documentation, enrollment, and transitions to further academic programs. College leaders can consider increasing opportunities for students to meet with advisors and making such meetings more accessible to students, such as by making them available virtually and during nontraditional hours.

College leaders frequently described an array of wraparound supports, in addition to advising support, that are meant to meet students’ wide range of needs, allowing them to thrive in college. Excelling colleges discussed wraparound supports—including mental health counseling, emergency financial assistance, childcare, textbook rentals, food assistance, professional clothing, and transportation assistance—more often than did aspiring colleges. One excelling college leader described employing a college counselor who acted as resource navigator, connecting students

So, when a student is in trouble, homeless, hungry, no food, okay, she [resource navigator] finds resources for them. She finds community resources. So, she connects them.

– Representative from an excelling college

with community resources available to them. College leaders can consider how to allocate limited resources—or identify additional resources outside the college—to the wraparound supports that are most needed. This may look different on different college campuses. For example, in urban areas, free public transportation may be a priority.

CONCLUSION

Although the study findings are not causal, there is much to be learned from community and technical college leaders, who described a wide range of approaches to ensuring that students complete college with a credential of value. The recommendations described earlier align with the recommendations described in [*Ready for Work: Adapting High-Impact Workforce Training Models in Community College Settings*](#) (Rutschow et al., 2024). *Ready for Work* analyzed common features of sector-focused workforce training programs—or sectoral programs—that demonstrated remarkable, long-term effects on participants' education, employment, and earnings in randomized controlled trials. The report found three overarching commonalities: deep employer involvement, short-term occupational training tailored to employer and labor market needs, and support services and advising that focus on helping participants build workplace skills that employers seek, while providing wraparound supports that help them persist in the program. The alignment between the findings from the current study of community colleges and the earlier study of sectoral programs underscores that community colleges that appear to be most successful at producing credentials of value are implementing many of the same practices as effective sectoral programs. In the future, causal research is needed to further understand which community college practices are most effective and for whom.

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