



# Community Colleges: Smarter Models for Economic Growth

By Natalie Branosky

For the past decade, there's been a herculean effort to align the strategies driving economic development (at the state, region, and local levels) with the practical aspects of prepping a skilled workforce. We workforce development professionals have been in the mix from the beginning, or have come to play a role in this system over time.

Skim any economic development strategy and the key industries of the local economy are highlighted for action: health care services, advanced manufacturing, business and professional services, transportation and logistics, etc. And *delivering* the talent to support employers in these sectors has been a challenge for everyone working to find solutions.

Is the structure there to deliver? The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) found that by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require some type of "middle skills" credential, however the rate at which colleges are awarding them falls far short of this number.<sup>1</sup> Businesses are looking to community colleges and public employment services to fill these skills gaps as economic development targets sit on the horizon.

There are bright sparks of promise, and the link between talent development and economic growth is clearer by the day. Local workforce and training systems, whose front door is the public employment service and community colleges, can now boast some exciting models for economic development.

**State of Oregon.** In some states, public policy has reorganized to get it right. The State of Oregon's [Office of Community Colleges and Workforce Development](#) coordinates community colleges and workforce programs to serve the state's present and future economic development needs. The department is focused on accelerating Oregon's economy "by creating jobs and economic stability for communities throughout the state during a volatile time." Overseen at the state level? Impressive. Bringing together Oregon's 17 community colleges and 18 adult basic skills providers and community-based organizations? More of this, please.

**State of California.** The state's [Division of Workforce and Economic Development](#) is the branch of state government that bridges skills and jobs and prepares California's workforce for the "[Doing What Matters for Jobs and the Economy](#)" framework that guides economic development. The focus is on technical education pathways, apprenticeships, and economic and workforce development, with an emphasis on employers, organized labor, local communities, community colleges, and other partners serving the wider economy. California's system is unique (but replicable!) in that the Foundation for California Community Colleges, the state-wide non-profit supporting the system, provides a suite of support mechanisms to improve higher education opportunities aligned with economic development. Rally your partners and check out this model for your strategy at home.

**Northern Virginia.** Northern Virginia Community College's [Regional Center for Workforce Education and Training](#) (WRC) is laser-focused on regional economic development priorities. Marketed as "the epicenter of high-quality training and education delivery," the center's goal is to meet the technological demands of Northern Virginia businesses, government, and military communities. Training strands are pulled directly from the regional economic development strategy: IT,

<sup>1</sup> Anthony P. Carnevale, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018* (Washington, DC: The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010).

cybersecurity, health care, and program management. Known throughout the country as an aspirational model, it is regional economic and workforce alignment at its best.

**Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania.** As for local strategies, the Lehigh Valley clearly recognizes the important link between talent and economic sustainability in “Bridging the Workforce Gap,” the [Lehigh Valley’s Workforce and Economic Development Strategy](#). The region is undertaking a strategic plan that will:

1. Identify the current labor supply and existing talent,
2. Gather information from businesses in the targeted industry sectors, as well as the key education and training partners, community colleges and university partners, and other leadership groups, and
3. Develop a strategy that maximizes existing programs and skilled employment routeways, and evaluates their effectiveness based on performance measures and annual polling

The strategy is forward-thinking, in a local area that has seen its share of economic downturn and revival. This approach will reach community colleges, universities, workforce development programs and public employment services that are making necessary alterations to meet economic development’s skills needs.

**Grand Rapids, Michigan.** At Grand Rapids Community College, the [School of Workforce Development](#) is forward thinking in its approach. Nimble and ready, the school offers short-term customized training based on the business community’s immediate needs. The school also pledges to provide students with skills they need in employment *and* in transfer. It’s the “transfer” part that grabs us: full employment in some local areas and low employment in others is a reality not yet tackled. If the migratory model is new again, skills that transfer from one local labor market to another is a model worth sharing.

**Burlington County, New Jersey.** In New Jersey, there’s a model to draw people into the talent pool, and feed the employers driving economic development at the [Workforce Development Institute](#), Rowan College, Burlington County. The “About Us” section says it all, with a bit of Jersey attitude: “Aligned with, and ahead of, similar state and federal initiatives, we combine all of the workforce development resources of county agencies and educational institutions into one powerful unit. With input from local employers, the Institute provides job seekers and businesses with the training and education they need to meet the challenges of the modern workforce. It is quickly becoming a national model for workforce development.” The Institute knows “time is money” and that pre-packaged solutions don’t always meet economic development goals. Enter the business response team, which designs packages that bring together workforce assessment, LMI, on-the-job training, tax incentive information, and lay-off aversion strategies. The [Burlington County Workforce Board](#) is the go-to body for this innovative model.

The economy is people. We’ve learned by working across state, regional and local economies that system-based solutions will be different according to the willingness to imagine new methods for meeting economic development goals. Other innovative help is needed to increase the graduation rate, such as financial assistance and 2 + 2 transfer programs. Meantime, community colleges and their workforce partners *have* arrived in this smarter space, with good news to share!

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