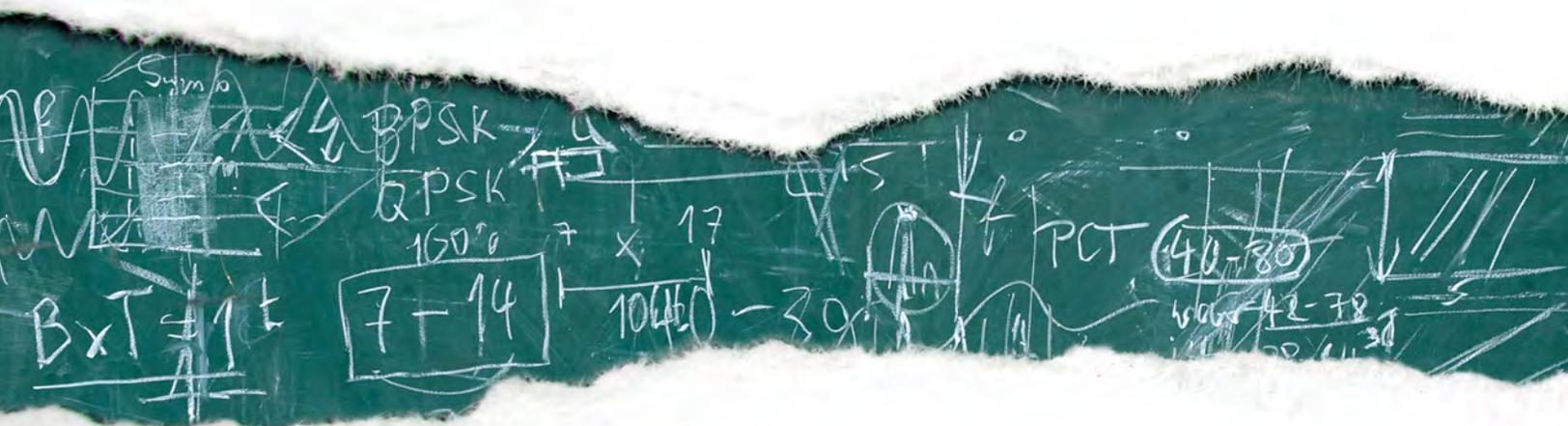


Closing the Region's Education Gaps: Community College as a Bridge to Business



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Who says that higher education and business don't mix?

- Cuyahoga County Community College in Cleveland has allied health and bioscience programs that send graduates to jobs in area hospitals and pharmaceutical companies.
- Butler County Community College in western Pennsylvania boasts a training program that prepares students to drill for natural gas buried deep within Marcellus shale.

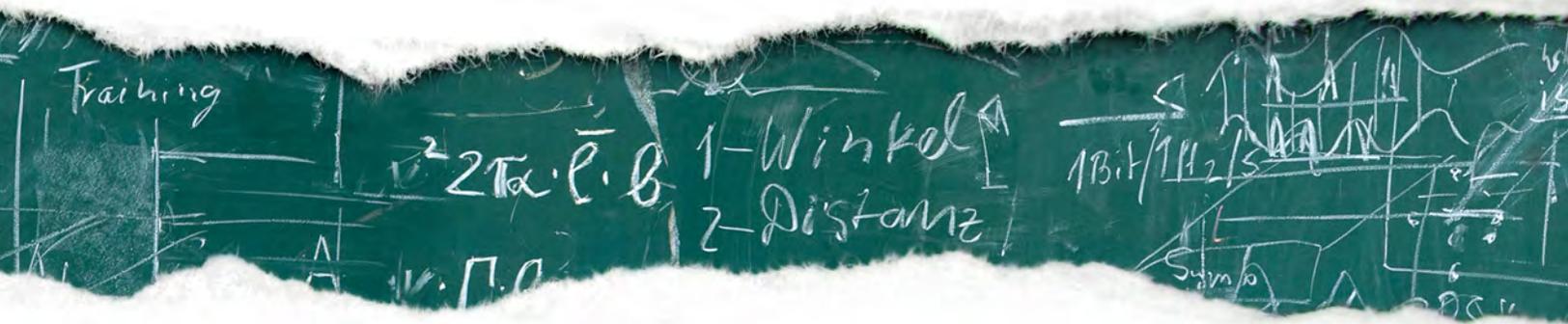
- And Sinclair Community College in Dayton—home of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base—just rolled out a certificate program in the field of unmanned aerial vehicles.

With programs like these, community colleges are doing more than ever to identify the types of workers that businesses need and to train students for them. But these colleges walk a fine line: On one side is their wish to encourage enrollment to meet the needs of the business community. On the other side is the reality that some would-be students aren't necessarily prepared for the rigor of these new programs or the jobs they are intended to fill.

Of particular concern are gaps between points of transition — from high school to college, then from college to the workforce. Many are expecting community colleges to play an important role in filling those gaps.

From Partnerships to Programs

Through the years, the mission of community colleges has remained unchanged: to provide education for people in all segments of society through an open admissions policy. But that doesn't mean that community colleges haven't altered their tactics to fit a changing world: Many have strengthened existing ties—and forged new ones—with their business communities. They aim to increase students' chances for employment and give local employers access to a skilled pool of job candidates.



Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) has strong ties with Greater Cleveland hospitals, which in turn support the college's bustling allied-health-careers programs.

"We work very closely with the health-careers programs, and students are placed very quickly," says Karen Miller, vice president of enrollment management and student affairs at Tri-C. "We have many partnerships, internships, and clinicals. It's booming."

Partnerships with Pura Vida restaurant and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum have also helped strengthen Tri-C's programs in Cleveland's growing culinary and film industries.

Efforts to match employment needs with education are widespread. Butler County Community College is an approved training provider for ShaleNET, a coalition of community colleges in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and New York, which provide a comprehensive program for high-priority occupations in the natural gas drilling and production industry.

Experts say community college enrollment is "counter-cyclical," that is, when the economy is bad and jobs are scarce, community college enrollment increases. Enrollment has been booming since the recession.

In southwestern Ohio, Sinclair Community College's new certificate program in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) stands to boost the region's economic development. Adam Murka, director of public information, believes that UAVs, which are currently used for missile strikes in the military, will soon be strong in the civilian market as well.

In fact, the use of UAVs has already expanded into many non-military roles, such as disaster response, search and rescue operations, and geographic information services.

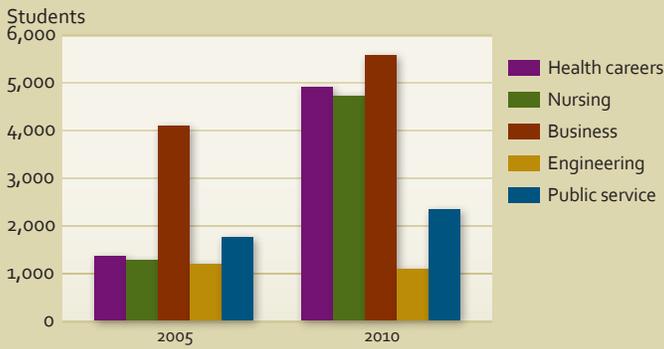
"We have all become well aware that in the last five to 10 years, workers' skill sets have become inextricably linked to workforce development," Murka says. "The four-year colleges have been part of that, and so have we."

Bringing In—and Catching Up—Students

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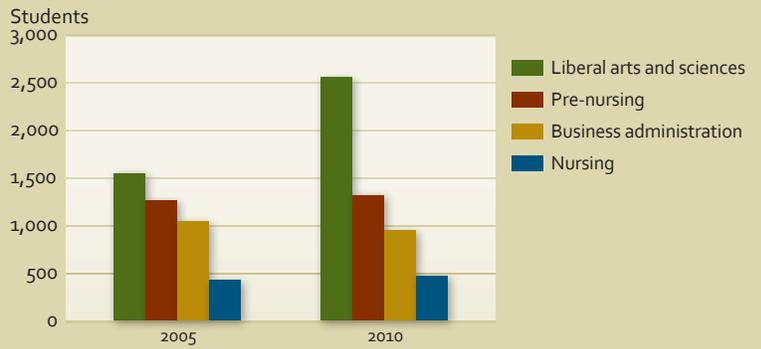
But the accessibility of community colleges can also attract students who are unprepared for the demands of new programs. In fact, while community colleges have gained 21.9 percent more students since fall 2007, they have found that more students need to brush up on skills that they should have learned in high school.

Cuyahoga Community College Enrollment: Selected Programs



Source: Cuyahoga Community College.

Sinclair Community College Enrollment: Selected Programs



Source: Sinclair Community College.

While community colleges have gained 21.9 percent more students since fall 2007, they have found that more students need to brush up on skills that they should have learned in high school.

“Community colleges across the nation are seeing more students who struggle,” Tri-C’s Miller says. “We put a lot of emphasis on wraparound services for the students who are coming in unprepared. We have significantly reallocated funds for mentoring programs and increased tutoring.”

For the last four years, Tri-C has been part of a national initiative called Achieving the Dream, which measures the effectiveness of mentoring programs and supplemental instruction. Since the college began keeping stats on its mentoring programs in 2008, retention from term to term has increased anywhere from 4 to 24 percent, Miller adds.

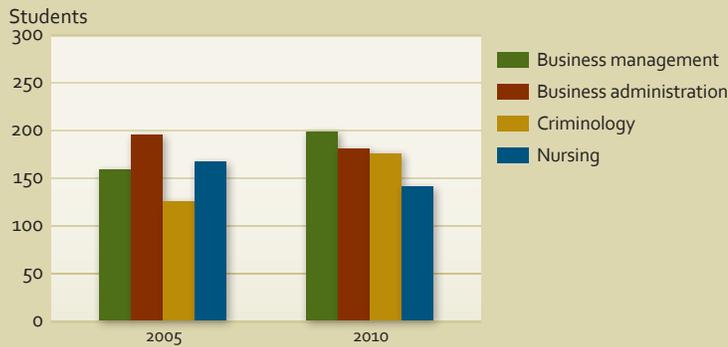
Butler County Community College also reports that some of its students lack math skills when they arrive, so the school provides tutoring and other services to bring them up to speed. “Sometimes it comes down to basic organizing skills, such as teamwork, showing up on time—from basic levels to more sophisticated levels,” says Stephen Catt, Butler’s executive director of workforce development.

Moving On

It may be too soon to say whether these programs and partnerships have been successful, but the potential is exciting.

Butler County Community College has a contract with an extraction company to help fill entry-level positions working the Marcellus shale fields in Pennsylvania. The school has also formed collaborations and partnerships with world-renowned training agencies in the extraction industry.

Butler Community College Enrollment: Selected Programs



Source: Butler Community College.

And the emerging energy industry is hiring as many accountants as laborers. The training agencies with which Butler is partnering already have an oil/gas accounting program. “Now [students] will have the vocabulary to understand the industry,” Catt says. He thinks this is only the beginning of workforce development in this field.

Catt believes the top 10 percent of students in America are headed for success, and the bottom 10 percent may get some sort of services to help them. Community colleges aim at the middle 80 percent, who might otherwise fall through the cracks. “That’s where we excel,” says Catt, “taking unprepared students and preparing them to be successful in the workforce.” ■

Recommended reading



Dionissi Aliprantis and Mary Zenker. 2011. “Recent Changes in the Relationship between Education and Male Labor Market Outcomes.” Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, *Economic Trends* (September). www.clevelandfed.org/research/trends/2011/1011/01houcon.cfm

Dionissi Aliprantis, Timothy Dunne, and Kyle Fee. 2011. “The Growing Difference in College Attainment between Women and Men.” Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, *Economic Trends* (October). www.clevelandfed.org/research/commentary/2011/2011-21.cfm?DCS.nav=RSS

Speech



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