

How to Deliver High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Community College Programs

The second in a three-part series from New America's New Models for Career Preparation Project

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About the New Models of Career Preparation Project

Despite the growing demand and availability of non-degree workforce training, outcomes for these programs are mixed. For some, non-degree programs are a faster, more affordable pathway to a good job, and, more importantly, a career that offers economic security—they represent the future of education. But for others, non-degree programs are a hyped-up distraction from degree attainment that leads to unemployment, underemployment, or employment in poverty-wage jobs with limited advancement opportunities—particularly for Black and Brown learners.

This project aims to help unlock the full potential of non-degree workforce training, especially at public

community colleges where these programs are commonly found. In 2019, the Center on Education & Labor at New America (CELNA) launched the [New Models for Career Preparation Project](#), a research and storytelling initiative to build a better understanding of non-degree workforce education and identify common characteristics of high-performing programs including the design, financing, and strategy principles that go into creating high-quality non-degree workforce programs at community colleges. However, many of these principles will be relevant to universities, non-profit, and even companies offering such programs.

Over the past three years, we studied literature in the field to synthesize, develop, and pressure-test a concise [quality framework](#) for non-degree programs at colleges. Then, we partnered with twelve colleges in

two sequential rounds of research to study what goes into quality program design.

- In **cohort one**, we studied what goes into creating a good non-degree workforce program at a college ranging from bootcamps to certificates to industry certification preparation programs and even apprenticeships. We identified, analyzed, and profiled six high-quality, non-degree programs at Brazosport College, Dallas College, Miami Dade College, Monroe Community College, Mesa Community College, and Bates Technical Colleges.
- In **cohort two**, we zoomed out to study the institutional structures that enable a community college to excel at non-degree workforce education. We chose six colleges committed to prioritizing workforce development for the second cohort: County College of Morris, Tidewater Community College, Des Moines Area Community College, Mott Community College, Lone Star Community College, and Sacramento City College.

We conducted site visits at each college to understand what works—and what doesn't—when creating non-degree programs. We collected data on colleges' best-performing programs and conducted extensive research on the work of dozens of peer organizations, academics, and researchers to ensure that we were additive to the field's understanding and, more importantly, the adoption of quality non-degree program development principles.

With both program and institutional level lenses in mind, we wrote this three-part brief series to help community college leaders—mainly presidents, provosts, and workforce leaders—better *plan*, *deliver*, and *improve* high-quality non-degree workforce programs.

We hope these briefs serve as valuable resources for the field—and we know that our work is not done. We look forward to continuing to help community colleges maximize their workforce impact in the years ahead.

How Colleges Should Use This New Models Brief Series



This brief is the second in a three-part series that focuses on creating non-degree workforce programs:

1. **How to Plan for High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Programs:** This brief outlines approaches and strategies that colleges should use during the initial stage of deciding whether and how to offer a workforce program.
2. **How to Deliver High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Programs:** This brief outlines approaches and strategies that colleges should use in the day-to-day process of administering a successful program.
3. **How to Use Data to Improve Non-Degree Workforce Programs:** This brief outlines data collection and data-driven continuous improvement strategies colleges should use to iterate programs regularly.

Community college leaders bring decades of expertise to their work, drawing from lived experiences and national best practices. We hope that this collection of briefs will help these leaders with practical examples that will inspire both institutional and program-level changes necessary to maximize the impact of non-degree workforce training.

We recognize that community colleges often strive for excellence in non-degree workforce innovation despite not receiving appropriate support from policymakers.

To address this need, we also produced a special [policy brief](#) to provide state and federal lawmakers with action items to help colleges maximize the benefits of non-degree workforce programs while mitigating the risks to students, institutions, employers, and the economy as a whole.

Adequate financing is critical to these programs, so together with our partners, we also recommended [innovative strategies for financing non-degree programs](#) for colleges to help in planning for and funding these programs.

Five Criteria for Identifying Quality Non-Degree Workforce Programs

We reviewed the literature on program quality and met with hundreds of colleges, employers, policy leaders, workforce and economic development professionals, philanthropy officers, and academics to help us synthesize five criteria for identifying quality non-degree workforce programs:

- 1. The program leads to quality jobs with strong labor market outcomes.** The program, or ideally the college, must have a way of showing that it leads directly to in-demand jobs that provide at least the local living wage (typically defined by using the [United Way's ALICE](#) or [MIT's Local Living Wage tool](#)) with a baseline of **quality attributes** such as paid leave, health insurance, retirement options, lower automation susceptibility, a safe work environment, schedule predictability and stability, nondiscrimination, and career growth opportunities.
- 2. The program advances equity and diversity in occupationally segregated jobs.** The program should understand the demographics of the occupations it trains for and specific, concrete goals for how it can diversify those occupations.
- 3. The program opens doors to advanced credentials or degrees.** The program lends itself to lifelong learning by providing graduates with credit that can count towards

future advanced credentials or a process to articulate non-credit programs for college credit.

- 4. The program is affordable.** The program should result in no more than a reasonable average student debt load and/or be accompanied by financial aid eligibility: Pell or other federal aid, state aid, employer financial aid, and learn-and-earn opportunities.
- 5. The program has strong completion rates.** The program has a respectable completion rate and a strong pass rate for occupational licensure or industry certification exams, if applicable.

Steps for Delivering High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Programs

This brief covers five essential steps to make non-degree program plans a reality.

1. Fund Your Program

Predictable and adequate federal and state funding for non-degree workforce training is essential for effective workforce programming. We wrote a brief about policy issues as part of this project, where we recommend that federal and state governments reform the way they fund these programs by changing legacy programs and supporting community college efforts to build capacity to provide high-quality workforce programming.

However, workforce-oriented colleges aren't waiting for government action, and they can't. **Colleges can use [creative strategies to fund non-degree programs](#)** including asset monetization, priority-based budgeting models, and the use of tax abatements. These three strategies are not unusual but they are also not well known. We found them through our research, and other colleges can learn from them.

Explore Asset Monetization

Colleges can generate revenue using underutilized land to support student programming, including non-degree workforce programs. This can take many forms. Some

colleges partner with private developers by [leasing land](#) to create a consistent income stream. Others, like **South Central College** in Minnesota, lease vacant land to the city government for youth athletics, generating revenue and also increasing the college's presence among underserved communities.

Consider Priority-Based Budgeting

Priority-based budgeting means that decisions are made based on data and they facilitate equity by centering student success in the financial planning process. The traditional process of budgeting means an organization starts with the amount that was budgeted the previous year and allocates additional funding based on the amount of money available. In [priority-based budgeting](#), the organization looks at its entire budget and identifies, ranks, and reallocates money to the services provided based on community priorities. Of course, this is easier said than done. **Broward College** [implemented](#) performance-based budgeting in 2020 and is an example of a school that has managed to reallocate funds from underutilized resources to use for basic needs and student advising.

Look into Tax Abatements

A reduction or exemption in the tax liability of an individual or corporation, [tax abatements](#) are usually used to incentivize certain activities, like job creation or real estate investment. **Brazosport College**, which controls a taxing jurisdiction within Brazoria County, Texas, considers and grants abatements to private employers who are planning expansions in the area. The value of the abatement is based on the number of new jobs the employer projects to bring to the community. The abatements act as deferred revenue for the college, while also generating an annual fee during the abatement period (typically 7–10 years). The deferred revenue acts as a flexible source of funding that goes into the college's general fund to support the operating budget.

2. Design Your Programs Delivery

Once funding strategies are secured, the program infrastructure can move into place. The way that programs are designed and offered to students is the heart of what makes a high-quality non-degree

program. College staff must consider how to obtain the staffing they need. You should also help support students stacking programs to further education. And program staff need to decide what modalities and learning experiences need to be included.

Hire the Right Staff

Program leaders must consider how they will staff the new program. These considerations include deciding if existing faculty members have enough capacity to teach all courses for the new program, if current faculty members need more training, if there is a need for additional full-time faculty, or if adjunct faculty would be a better fit. Should new faculty members be needed, it is [important](#) to consider how normal hiring qualifications may need to be modified. For instance, requiring a certain number of years of teaching experience should be reconsidered if it isn't relevant to the role. Through our research, we have heard that adjunct faculty, hired part-time from local employers, have knowledge and skills that more naturally align with what graduates need to excel in the labor market. The day jobs of adjunct faculty can strengthen real-world connections for a workforce program. In addition, some employers, like Intel offer [externships or professional development](#) to faculty members so they can gain the latest knowledge from industry.

Plan for Career and Educational Progression

As laid out in our first brief on [planning high-quality non-degree programs](#), colleges also need to plan for how a workforce program will serve as the next step of an educational journey and career ladder. Whether the program is for credit or non-credit, there should be a clear pathway to the next credential. Creating clear, [streamlined pathways](#) between a non-credit program and its for-credit counterparts ensures that there are no dead ends for students. Stackability is also important for for-credit, non-degree programs. These certificates should be designed to easily culminate in a degree.

Colleges need to let students and graduates know about opportunities to stack credentials and continue to advance their knowledge and training. Communicating about stackability in the program's marketing materials

and embedding that message in the enrollment and recruitment strategy are essential to ensuring that this kind of academic and professional progression benefits students. Advisors, case managers, faculty, and staff members who support students should also be prepared to explain and support student progression through stackable credentials. Create a strategy for reaching out to graduates to ask about their interest in further credentials. At the same time, the pathways need to map to actual employer needs, as opposed to creating stackability for stackability's sake.

Decide on Learning Delivery and Modality

It is important to understand your students. What do they need out of the program and what motivates them? It may seem that online instruction is the best way to provide program access to busy adults with caregiving responsibilities, but [research has shown](#) that many adults have a hard time staying motivated with online-only programs and that in-person, cohort-based experiences, whether on the job or in the classroom, help students stay motivated to finish their education. Ask students in your target population about their preferences for educational delivery.

Specialized accreditation and/or regulations of the target occupation may also influence many of these decisions. For instance, many allied health programs require full-time enrollment, have required work-based learning experiences in the form of clinicals, and have selective admissions. [Monroe Community College](#) designed its certified nursing assistant program with employers in a way that improved the jobs for graduates. For instance, they negotiated higher starting pay and more schedule control for students exiting the program. It has been working to design a licensed practical nursing program that will be offered part-time at the students' work site, making it accessible to the mostly Black and brown single mothers it serves.

- What training, education, or professional experience do instructors/faculty members need to teach in the new program? Are adjunct faculty members needed?
- How will the college communicate the ways that the program's credential fits in with other

academic or professional offerings? How do stackability pathways map onto career ladders and increased earnings?

- Based on student interest assessment and equity goals developed in the planning stage, should the program be full-time, part-time, or both? Online, in-person, or hybrid?
- Is the program open enrollment or by application, and what prerequisites are required?
- Is there value in using a cohort-based program structure?
- Will you incorporate work-based learning? If so, what connections with employers need to be in place to make that work?

3. Ensure Your Program's Curricular Relevance

Rather than meeting with advisory committees a couple of times a year to ensure that what you are teaching aligns with what the industry needs, consider ways to deepen engagement with employers around what is taught in your workforce programs, particularly with a new program.

Ensure Employer Partners are Willing to Substantially Contribute

Alignment with employer needs takes time and attention from employers as well as program leadership. Employers should commit to substantially contributing to curriculum development and maintenance. One way to ensure commitment to the program is for employers to contribute money or equipment. Other types of engagement include interview and hiring guarantees, lending employees to teach, providing internships, and helping recruit candidates. For example, **Mesa Community College** partnered with Boeing to create an interview guarantee for its [Cable Harness Wiring Boot Camp](#). All students who graduate from Mesa's program benefit from an immediate connection to a potential employer, the company gets a ready pool of

applicants, and the college gets to market the connection.

Define the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities at the Start of the Program

When setting up a program, colleges may need a more intensive process to establish the initial knowledge skills, and abilities (KSAs) the program will cover. One way to do this is to use the [Developing a Curriculum](#) (DACUM) process.

This process starts with an initial occupational profile which, through a panel of incumbent workers, enumerates the most important elements of the job and the tasks that take up the most time. Next, those tasks are validated with additional conversations with industry. Last, the faculty create a curriculum based on the occupational profile and the required tasks. Not all colleges need to use this process, but some process of working with incumbent workers and employers is important for getting the program curriculum correct from the start. [Valencia College](#), for example, worked through the DACUM process with Concord Management, a property management company in Orlando. [Columbus State Community College](#) used a modified DACUM process called [Compression Planning](#) to achieve a similar goal with less investment of time.

Colleges can also evaluate labor market information data from job postings to assess skill demands across many employers in a region. This is an important complement to a more in-depth analysis of skills because while one employer may not value a particular skill set, other employers might feel differently. Having multiple ways to assess employers' requirements and the value they place on certain skills will help prepare students for a variety of paths after earning a credential.

Sustain a Strong Relationship with Employers

Community colleges use advisory committees to engage employers at different stages of the program development process. In the first brief, we discuss how colleges can ensure that these committees are used to improve programs. Part of making advisory committees work better is to maintain strong, personal relationships with hiring managers and those in the front office at

firms that hire your program's graduates. Maintaining these relationships should fall within the responsibilities of a faculty or staff member at the college. There should also be a clear way to transfer those relationships when there is turnover at either the employer partner or the college. [Monroe Community College](#), for example, [implemented a customer relationship management](#) system to track its hundreds of employer contacts and partnership initiatives. A team of business relationship specialists keeps track of requests, interests, and communication with employer partners.

- Do you have a clear process for gathering and validating the KSAs for your program?
- Have employers confirmed that your KSAs and equity goals align with their needs?
- Do you have a process for creating and running advisory committee meetings that will ensure the program remains relevant?
- What is the evidence of employer buy-in (e.g., financial, in-kind investments, marketing)?
- Who is in charge of maintaining relationships with employers? Who are they working with at the employer? What is the process for transferring these relationships when there is staff turnover?

4. Design Your Program's Equity Strategy

Like much of our labor market, occupations that are accessible with only a non-degree credential tend to be [segregated by race and gender](#). Jobs with higher compensation, like those in [manufacturing, tend to be dominated by white males](#). Lower-wage care jobs, like certified nursing assistant or home health aide, tend to be dominated by women of color.

Careful non-degree program design can increase racial and gender equity and mobility. Without care, the opposite outcome can occur. [Research](#) from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that community colleges award Black students certificates at

a higher rate than other groups. Too often, non-degree programs track these learners into low-paying jobs with little opportunity for advancement. Employment and wage outcomes for racial minorities with short-term certificates **tend to lag behind those for white learners.**

Because of these inequities in the labor market, colleges need to consider the program equity strategy in the design phase. Equity should not be an afterthought, but instead a fundamental part of the program design and delivery.

For example, San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium analyzed its data on labor market outcomes for its workforce programs and found that **Black students were systematically making less than other graduates.** They found that this trend was not the case in only one program: energy and construction. Now the consortium is investigating what is happening in that program that might help improve the outcomes in other programs. Consortium leaders aim to identify concrete ways to better support Black students in other certificate programs.

Recruit Diverse Participants

Program designers should look at the gender and racial makeup of the occupation using data gathered in the planning phase and create a plan to recruit students who are underrepresented in that occupation. One way to create an outreach strategy is to conduct **focus groups** and surveys to see what individuals in the target populations think about the college, higher education, and the occupation the program leads to. Outreach can include activities like **dual enrollment programs**, social media advertising, and engagement with community organizations that serve the populations you would like to consider enrolling. The **County College of Morris** in New Jersey, for instance, realized that it was under-enrolling Latino and Black residents from its service area. To address this disparity, they created a **targeted outreach strategy** for those communities that included a free tuition promise program. Last year, the college increased Latino enrollment enough to qualify as a Hispanic Serving Institution. At **North Dakota State**

College of Science (NDSCS) in Wahpeton, leaders analyzed their demographic data and saw that **refugees recently settled in their service area** were not accessing good jobs that employers were struggling to fill. With that information, the college was able to create programs targeting that community. **Broward College's BrowardUP program** established free non-degree training programs with wraparound services in six ZIP codes where college attainment was lowest and unemployment was highest. More than 95 percent of students are Black, Latinx, or other racial minorities and more than 70 percent are older than 30.

Work with Employers to Improve Jobs and Set Equity Goals

Many students are not attracted to a particular occupation because they believe they may face a hostile working environment or they fear other forms of discrimination in the workplace. Program staff need to work with their employer partners to hire, support, and compensate a more diverse workforce coming out of the program. Program leadership should then set goals, with their employer partners, on how many underrepresented students they want to enroll and graduate so that the program reflects the diversity of the community. Working with the college's institutional research office, the program contacts should monitor progress towards those goals.

Provide Wraparound Services

All students need access to support services to navigate the educational experience. Academic advising, coaching, mental health counseling, emergency grant aid, food pantries, child care, and other supports are particularly important for populations who have been historically underserved by higher education, including in non-degree programs. These supports are key to helping students succeed in their programs. Colleges need to monitor student use of these support services and conduct an analysis of which supports students need most and which seem effective in helping students stay enrolled until completion. Particularly with advising and coaching, it is also important for the staff providing the services to demographically reflect the students they are serving.

- How will you recruit students underrepresented in the occupation?
 - What are the enrollment and/or completion goals for students in historically underrepresented and underserved demographic groups in the program?
 - Which wraparound services will best help these students persist? Are the staff members offering those services reflective of the demographics of the students they are serving?
 - How will you work with employers to support the placement of these students?
 - What do you need from marketing and recruitment to support program enrollment?
 - How should you communicate the program to potential students?
 - How does your communications plan support your equity goals?
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5. Design Your Communications and Marketing Plan

When starting a new program, designers must also think about how they will market the new program to potential students. Building a high-quality program alone is not enough if students do not enroll. Therefore, college and program leaders must create and execute a marketing strategy that connects directly to enrollment. The messaging of that plan should also align with the populations the college is trying to serve. First, program staff should plug into the college’s marketing department and connect with any recruiters or enrollment coaches the college employs. Ensuring that students in these groups know about the program and know where to refer to people who are interested in learning more is key.

It can also mean **working with** marketing to **create messages** for **target populations** that can be shared more broadly. Marketing can help refine the messages which can be used on marketing materials, recruiting events, social media strategy, and even the program website to let students know that the program is ready for enrollment. For instance, **Valencia College** conducted student focus groups and found that different messages resonated with students applying just out to high school and adults contemplating college. In response, it created different marketing campaigns that applied to each population.

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