

# CLOSING THE GAP

COMMUNITY COLLEGES EMERGE AS ADVANTAGE FOR RURAL LEARNING

BY TONI LAPP, SENIOR WRITER

**J**onathan Fletchall of Pittsburg, Kan., is learning about motorcycle mechanics. Tyler Van Meter of Cheyenne, Okla., is learning about global positioning system technology used in tractors. Benson Begay of Gallup, N.M., is learning to advocate for victims in the Navajo Nation legal system.

While these rural students are pursuing diverse careers, what they have in common is their choice of educational institution: community colleges.

At these institutions, students can earn associate in applied science degrees, which confer very specific training tailored to an industry or avocation.

This route to gainful employment is being touted by some as the key to giving rural areas a competitive edge again. Jason Henderson and Stephan Weiler of the Center for the Study of Rural America at the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City report on the emerging trend in a research paper, "Rural America's New Path to Workforce Skills," summarized in the July 2005 *Main Street Economist*.

"Community colleges play a big role in economic development," says Weiler, assistant vice

president and economist with the Bank. "They provide precisely the skill-based degrees and certifications that fit the demand of employers."

Rural areas fight an incorrect perception that their residents are not as educated as urbanites, says Henderson, senior economist. On the contrary, rural residents are increasing their educational attainment, and they're doing so by learning skills that are practical in today's job market.

"If you only look at bachelor degrees, you're not seeing the whole picture," says Henderson. "Rural residents are increasingly ramping up their job skills with associate degrees."

In fact, if one looks at the percentages of the population obtaining associate degrees, the figure is higher for people from rural areas than for their metro counterparts.


In 1995, percentages of rural and metropolitan residents holding associate degrees were roughly the same: 8 percent for nonmetro residents versus 7.8 percent for metro residents. By 2004, the percentage acquiring associate or technical degrees had shot up 40 percent for nonmetro residents, compared with 14 percent for metro residents.

Perhaps one reason rural residents are discovering the value of two-year degrees is because that's where the action is.

In his research studying trends in U.S. job structure, Chad Wilkerson, a policy economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, says he was surprised to find that, according to

**THE HARLEY-DAVIDSON** training program of Fort Scott Community College is the only publicly offered program of its kind, says its director, Steve Vergara.





**HARLEY-DAVIDSON**  
Program director Steve Vergara and second-year student Patrick Dineen work on a motorcycle during class at Fort Scott Community College.

the latest projections by the U.S. Labor Department, jobs requiring an associate degree or vocational award are expected to grow slightly faster through 2012 than jobs requiring a bachelor degree.

“Having the right amount and right kind of education is important for success,” says Wilkerson. “We generally give the message that more education is always better, but the current demands of employers are causing us to rethink that message.”

His research can be found in the second quarter 2005 *Economic Review*.

### **An educational evolution**

Community colleges have evolved considerably since the first junior college was found-

ed in 1901. Then, the institutions were two-year liberal art schools that taught curriculum intended to transfer to baccalaureate degrees.

The term “junior college” fell out of favor as the colleges changed their missions to

## Top Five Fields of Study at Community Colleges

1. APPLIED HEALTH

2. SKILLED TRADES-INDUSTRIAL

3. PUBLIC SERVICES

4. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

5. BUSINESS

SOURCE: American Association of Community Colleges

focus more on local economies and community development.

Today, most community colleges and technical schools offer a broad spectrum of academic and training programs including remedial education, traditional courses for degree-

seeking students on a budget and contract training customized for individual employers.

“Some of the evolution (of community colleges), like evolution in general, is borne of environmental necessity,” says Bill Scaggs, executive director of the Rural Community College Alliance in Meridian, Miss. “It’s difficult to operate a thriving institution in a declining community.”

As technology becomes more sophisticated, high school graduates are no longer sufficiently prepared to enter the workforce, says Stuart Rosenfeld of Regional Technical Strategies, Inc. (RTS), a nonprofit organization in Carrboro, N.C. that does policy research analysis into workforce and economic development. Community colleges are

adept at teaching technical skills that employers need, he says.

RTS was founded with a mission to improve the economic vitality of the rural areas that were losing their industry, says Rosenfeld. Community colleges emerged as an underappreciated asset. Some had created “advanced technology centers” that worked with machine builders and software designers and offered training for small- and medium-sized businesses from expert faculty.

Community colleges were well-positioned for this kind of training because they are less research oriented and more accessible than universities, says Rosenfeld.

One strategy RTS has employed in invigorating areas is building business “clusters.” The idea is that businesses, suppliers, professional associations and educational institutions congregate in one area, creating synergy. Examples abound—Detroit and automobiles, North Carolina and furniture, Wichita and aerospace, to name a few.



The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) tracks the popularity of programs offered by its member institutions. Not surprisingly, health care, designated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as having great growth potential, led the field, says Sara McPhee, research associate.

Following health care, skilled trades programs were the next-hottest fields of study, she says. As such, these programs—in construction, agriculture and manufacturing—were among the most commonly added to the offerings of community colleges. But interestingly, these programs were also the most frequently discontinued, according to AACC. How can this be?

“This demonstrates the way in which community colleges respond to the needs of local communities,” says McPhee. “As a manufacturing plant in one community closes down, a manufacturing plant may be opening in another community. The residents in the first community no longer need their community college to offer a manufacturing program, whereas the company opening the plant in the second community wants the local college to open a program as soon as possible.”

This is a concept that rural areas can also employ, say the economists from the Center for the Study of Rural America.

“Community colleges can be vital cogs to evolving clusters by ratcheting the existing skill base of a local area,” says Weiler.

## Think locally

John Deere began partnering with community colleges in 1989, after dealerships—largely in rural areas—gave corporate officers feedback on the need for a quality workforce.

“Our dealers were telling us they needed a good resource for well-trained technicians,” says Kenneth Buell, manager of college partnerships for the tractor manufacturer. The first site for the two-year program was Southeast Community College in Milford, Neb. The program has been so successful that the company now sponsors sites at 16 community colleges in the United States. John Deere provides tools, equipment and instructor training to the schools.


Technical training is compulsory for anyone wanting to work on the tractors, many of which are equipped with GPS technology, Windows-based computer programs and remote capabilities. But the company also wanted its technicians to have a well-rounded education, hence the partnership with community colleges. Students are required to complete coursework in technical writing, personal finance and communications.

“We want our graduates to have a good career path,” says Buell. “It gives local people the chance to go back to their hometown and build a career.”

This is what appealed to Tyler Van Meter. The 21-year-old attended a four-year university for a year with the goal of earning a bachelor’s degree in industrial technology and someday teaching a high school shop class. But he began to rethink his plan after a summer job at a John Deere dealership close to home, where he learned about the program. The curriculum suited him, he says.

“It’s more hands-on than anything,” he says. “I like working with my hands more than sitting at a desk.”

But most important: “This way I get to stay close to home.”



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## Targeting niches

While community colleges excel by targeting the needs of the region, not all the programs are technical in nature.

The Tribal Court Advocate Program taught at the University of New Mexico at Gallup, an institution that includes two-year and four-year programs, is emblematic of this. The associate degree program fills a very specialized need in that region: graduates are qualified to represent clients in the nearby Navajo Nation court.

Benson Begay, 40, a paralegal who is in the final semester of the program, says it fills a niche in the community. He speaks fluent Navajo and will be able to use his education to do what he does best: “I like to help people, and these are people who need help, who don’t understand laws and procedures (of the court),” he says. “I feel this is my way of giving back to the community.”

Community colleges often are seen as a more welcoming environment for nontraditional students.

Like Begay, Jonathan Fletchall is older than the traditional university student. Fletchall, 25, a former high school dropout who is married and has two children, says he felt he was languishing in a job as a fork-lift operator when he found out about Harley-Davidson’s pilot program at Fort Scott Community College in Frontenac, Kan. He recently spent the summer interning at a dealership, where he finished the assembly of bikes out of the box. The experience confirmed that he was on the right career path, he says.

“As my kids are getting older, I want to set a good example,” he explains. “Judging by the toys the mechanics here have, this will be a good job.”

Fort Scott program director Steve Vergara says his program is the only publicly offered one of its kind. As corporate sponsor, Harley-Davidson provides diagnostic equipment, motorcycles, parts and accessories, training manuals, and instructor training. The motorcycle giant was interested in a program that would give graduates “soft skills” for dealing with the increasingly affluent Harley owners, says Vergara. Graduates have the potential to follow a management career path with Harley-Davidson or work at dealerships. Some participants have aspirations to open repair shops back in their hometowns, so the program stresses entrepreneurship, he says.

This type of return on investment is what community colleges are all about. Says Henderson: “By helping local people invest in themselves, community colleges can be catalysts for rural regions seeking new economic opportunities in a globalizing economy.”

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

FOR FURTHER READING ON THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GO TO:

[www.KansasCityFed.org/TEN](http://www.KansasCityFed.org/TEN)

**COMMENTS/QUESTIONS** are welcome and should be sent to [teneditors@kc.frb.org](mailto:teneditors@kc.frb.org).