

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

research brief

Examples of Promising Current Community College Initiatives to Serve Older and Dislocated Workers

by Maria Heidkamp

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, many dislocated workers and older job seekers have turned to community colleges for education and training to help improve their prospects for reemployment. In response to this demand — as well as to changing demographics and an aging population — many community colleges across the nation have launched an array of efforts designed to improve the prospects for success for these adult students and older job seekers, who often have needs when pursuing postsecondary education and training that are distinct from younger students right out of high school. To learn more about some of these efforts, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University conducted outreach to identify examples of current efforts under way at community colleges that relate to adults, with a focus on older adults and dislocated workers. The Heldrich Center partnered with a number of national membership organizations that focus on the workforce system and community colleges for assistance with the outreach, including the National Council for Continuing Education and Training, the National Council for Workforce Education, the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, the National Governors Association, and the National Association of Workforce Boards. The *Employment and Training Reporter* also ran a notice about the study, and information was posted on various social media sites,

such as the LinkedIn group of the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals. This brief highlights some of the different initiatives identified by several of the states and colleges that responded to the requests for information.

In reviewing these dedicated efforts to assist older and dislocated workers and other adult students, the Heldrich Center identified several common strategies and practices. Among them are the following:

- Through centers dedicated to serving adults, community colleges offered career and personal counseling and academic advising services targeted to adults' needs that were available at accessible times. They also offered online and self-service tools targeted to adults.
- Community colleges offered courses specifically for adults to address their need for college preparation, work search assistance, and computer literacy. These courses also yielded peer groups or cohorts of adults who provide support to each other along the way.
- Community colleges developed accelerated programs and classes to help dislocated workers and adult students complete programs in an efficient and flexible manner and help them return to work as quickly as possible. They offered

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online and distance learning, as well as opportunities to gain credit for prior work or learning experiences.

- Community colleges partnered with the public workforce system to help connect dislocated workers and older job seekers to college programs and help connect these students to job search supports. Partnerships included administering the programs of the Workforce Investment Act and collocating American Job Centers (previously known as One-Stop Career Centers).

Examples of some of these strategies follow.

Community College of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

In spring 2009, the Community College of Allegheny County established the Career Transitions Center for Dislocated Workers, which has served nearly 500 dislocated workers as of the spring 2012 semester. The college coordinates its efforts with the local Pennsylvania CareerLinks (American Job Centers), both in terms of referrals and alignment of eligible programs with high-priority occupations as defined by the Workforce Investment Board. The center offers a dislocated worker tuition waiver that targets short-term, high-priority programs with the prospect to help individuals return to work quickly, as identified by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor. This includes a number of credit certificate programs that are typically completed in two semesters, such as information technology support, heating and air conditioning technology, basic computer-aided drafting, and accounting. Accelerated opportunities also include an 8-week Nurse Aide Training program, as well as a 75-hour Medical Office Manager program for dislocated workers age 50 and older. The college has had success with a number of dislocated workers who have made complete career changes from jobs such as warehouse forklift operator,

retail manager, and real estate agent to certified nurse aides (CNAs), which are in high demand in the health care industry. Further, the CNA program can serve as a recruitment feeder for the college's nursing program. The Medical Office Manager program has allowed those older dislocated workers who already had some professional office experience to expand their skills to enable them to compete for employment in the health care industry, including in physicians' offices, medical practices, and hospital facilities. The program provides training in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act laws and regulations, occupational safety and health requirements, the fundamentals of managed care, customer service, and fraud and abuse in health care.

For more information: <http://www.ccac.edu/default.aspx?id=151464>

Forsyth Technical Community College, North Carolina

Highlighted in President Obama's 2011 State of the Union speech for its role in helping dislocated factory workers transition to new careers, Forsyth Technical Community College serves a wide range of adult and older students. Through the Forsyth Tech Educational Career/JobLink Center in Winston-Salem, the college has partnered with the local Workforce Investment Board to offer training, career counseling, and job referral services. Through the college's continuing education division, Forsyth Technical Community College offers a number of short-term (less than six months) occupational training programs through the JobsNOW initiative. JobsNOW is targeted to adults who are unemployed and underemployed and offers training in a number of areas and skills that have high employer demand, including health care, construction, administration, and trades. JobsNOW is a joint initiative of the North Carolina Community College system and the North Carolina Department of Commerce.

For more information: <http://www.forsythtech.edu/cce/continuing-education/jobsnow>

Gateway Community College, Arizona

Gateway Community College, part of the Maricopa Community College system, offers support services specifically targeted to the rapidly growing “adult re-entry” population, defined as students who are at least 25 years old and are either returning to school or starting school for the first time, through the Adult Re-Entry Program. Described as “a learning community for adults in transition,” the 16-week program is offered each fall and spring semester and includes two courses — Strategies for College Success and a basic Microsoft Office course. Upon completion, students earn six college credit hours. The program tries to reduce the stress of the re-entry processes and includes financial aid counseling, career assessments, and personal, career, and academic advising.

For more information: <http://www.gatewaycc.edu/adult-re-entry>

Harper College, Illinois

Since 2009, Harper College, in Palatine, Illinois, has run a monthly support group called Career Stimulus for dislocated workers or other adults who are going through a career transition. The program involves a mix of expert speakers, networking opportunities, and advice on job search techniques. Members of the support group are eligible to participate in other seminars that focus on career assessment and communication skills, including social media. In addition, Harper College partners closely with the public workforce system and runs an extension office in the northern Cook County Illinois workNet Center in Arlington Heights.

For more information: http://goforward.harpercollege.edu/about/community/career_stimulus/index.php

Middlesex County College, New Jersey

Middlesex County College, in Edison, New Jersey, has dedicated centers to serve both adults and veterans. Listed on the college’s Web site under services for adults and nontraditional students, the Center for Adults Returning to Education (CARE) targets adults who have completed some college credits and want to return to finish an associate’s degree. CARE is funded by a grant through the federal College Access Challenge Grant program as part of New Jersey’s Disengaged Adults Returning to College initiative. The program waives the application fee and provides funding to cover the costs of textbooks, supplies, and fees for adults who qualify. Among the opportunities to help adults accelerate their progress toward a degree are credit for prior learning programs, as well as some redesigned courses that run in two 7-week sessions instead of the traditional 15 weeks. It is one example of programs at community colleges across the nation that are trying to encourage “near completers” or “ready adults” to help meet the increasing demand for college-educated workers, some of which have been profiled in a recent report by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education titled *Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the Non-Traditional No More Project* (Lane, Michelau, & Palmer, 2012).

For more information: <http://www2.middlesexcc.edu/admissions/enrollment-instructions/adultnon-traditional.html>

Middlesex County College also operates the Center for Veterans Services, which has served roughly 300 veteran students since it was launched in 2011, 54 of whom graduated in May 2012. The center, which

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is staffed by a full-time director who is a veteran, provides counseling and advising to veterans to help them understand how to navigate the college bureaucracy. The college realized there are over 13,000 veterans in the county and will be reaching out to potential students. The college has found that veterans, some of whom have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorders, often have concerns about re-entering school and appreciate the dedicated support provided by the center.

For more information: <http://www2.middlesexcc.edu/services-and-support/veterans-services.html>

Monroe Community College, New York

Monroe Community College, a unit of the State University of New York (SUNY) in Rochester, New York, offers a range of programs targeted to adult students, who make up roughly a third of the student population of 18,000, starting with their own dedicated tab on the admissions page of the school's Web site. The director of the college's Office of Experiential and Adult Learning reports that the first question adult students typically ask is how long a program will take to complete. In response, the college emphasizes the opportunity for adults to pursue accelerated learning programs, including a fast-track program that allows adults to complete an associate's degree within three years or less while attending school on a part-time basis. The school notes that this program features "more out-of-class guided independent learning" than traditional programs. This would seem to appeal to adult learners, who have been characterized in previous research as being self-directed and autonomous, and who also like to bring their prior life experiences and knowledge to their learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011).

In addition to the fast-track program, Monroe Community College's Office of Experiential and Adult Learning manages other services and programs for adult students, including academic planning and advising for adult programs, which are designed to accommodate working adults. Other options that offer flexibility and/or condensed timeframes to help adults achieve degrees more quickly include opportunities to receive college credit from sources outside of the classroom such as from prior learning and from life and work experiences, including the military, distance and online learning through the SUNY Learning Network, and other alternative scheduling options such as summer and intersession courses. Monroe Community College also participates in the American Association of Community College's Plus 50 Completion Strategy.

For more information: <http://www.monroecc.edu/depts/adulted/index.htm>

Seattle Community College District and South Seattle Community College

The Seattle Community College district developed a Web site, called Start Next Quarter (<https://www.startnextquarter.org>), to help the increasing number of older workers returning to school for training and retraining. Funded by a grant from Walmart, the site includes a survey designed to help potential older students learn what funding they may qualify for, such as Workforce Investment Act dislocated worker supports, and consider what and where they might want to study. Following the survey, customers are invited to an orientation to learn about specific programs.

In partnership with AARP, the Seattle Community College district has also developed classes for older displaced workers in basic computer skills in Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel, email, LinkedIn

and other social media, applying for jobs online, and basic financial literacy. Other classes have emphasized job networking skills and interviewing techniques. At South Seattle Community College, a program administrator observed that in addition to acquiring the computer and other skills, the students in these classes, generally older job seekers, tend to bond together and provide peer support to each other, often going from “discouraged and lacking confidence to encouraged and hopeful.”

South Seattle Community College’s career center serves as a WorkSource affiliate site, part of Washington State’s public employment and training system. South Seattle Community College WorkSource delivers a workshop every quarter called “Mid-Life Career Changing in the New Economy” on campus, as well as in the spring and fall quarters throughout the King County Library System. In addition to the workshop, the college offers a related job search packet for mature workers.

For more information: <http://careerservices.southseattle.edu/documents/2012/Mid-Life-Career-Changing-in-the-New-Economy.pdf>

Walters State Community College, Tennessee

At Walters State Community College, adult students (25 and older) comprise roughly a third of the student population, and of those, roughly half are over 35. Among the programs targeted to these adult learners is College Express, a fast-track alternative delivery program designed for adult students who may be juggling work and family responsibilities, as well as for those students who want to complete a degree one class at a time. Certain courses are offered in five- to seven-week blocks, with one class beginning immediately after the prior class finishes. The College Express format is available for several programs, including business, general studies, teaching, early childhood education,

clean energy technology, and pre-allied health. The dean of workforce education notes that because a significant amount of learning takes place outside the classroom, students enrolled in College Express must be highly motivated and independent learners. An article about the program on the college’s Web site observes that the students in the program become part of a cohort of working adults, and that teamwork provides a supportive learning environment. For those students who must complete developmental courses, the college offers Learning Express, which, like College Express, offers fast-track developmental courses that can be completed in five- and seven-week blocks in the evening.

Other flexible learning options for students include a wide array of distance education and online degree programs. In addition, all of the college’s technical certificate programs, designed to help adults who need to get to work quickly, are fully embedded in associate degree programs.

Walters State Community College is the administrative entity for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds in its 10-county area and maintains fiscal responsibility for the program. The college also provides services directly to older workers in the six local career centers and staffs the Smoky Mountains Area Workforce Investment Board. Working in a close partnership with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the staff identifies demand occupations that may be a good fit for many older students and dislocated workers, including Trade Adjustment Assistance participants. WIA participants attending Walters State have services available on campus in the Center for Workforce Education.

For more information: <http://www.ws.edu/academics/fast-track/college-express/>

References

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About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, based at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, is a dynamic research and policy center devoted to strengthening the nation's workforce. It is one of the nation's leading university-based centers dedicated to helping America's workers and employers respond to a rapidly changing 21st Century economy.

The Center's motto —“Solutions at Work”— reflects its commitment to offering practical solutions, based on independent research, that benefit employers, workers, and job seekers. The Center's policy recommendations and programs serve a wide range of Americans at all skill levels.

Learn more about the Heldrich Center at <http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu>.

About the Author

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