

A photograph of a diverse group of students in a classroom or computer lab. In the foreground, a young man with short dark hair, wearing a grey and white striped sweater, is smiling and looking at a laptop. To his left, a young woman with glasses and a grey sweater with orange polka dots is looking down at a smartphone. In the background, other students are blurred, some looking at their devices. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a modern educational environment.

Providing Support for Community Colleges Now, and a Lever for Transformative Change

AUTHORS

Mary Ostrye

Consultant

Bruce Rankin

Consultant

Jim Jacobs

President Emeritus, Macomb Community College

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

Introduction

Community colleges are not immune to the challenges faced by the education sector as they try to continue providing quality learning experiences during the ongoing pandemic. Some might argue that COVID-19 exposed vulnerabilities that have long needed attention, such as the 16-week semester model, a heavy reliance on in-person learning, a lack of competency-based curricula, rigid registration/advising policies, and limited wraparound services for non-degree-seeking students.

Meeting Need for Flexible, Remote Programming

At the same time, the unexpected, swift movement to remote learning strained all colleges to effectively serve students and employers. Workforce programming, including career and technical education (CTE) programs and noncredit workforce development programs, have been particularly affected and are facing significant challenges in the age of the new coronavirus. Remote learning and flexible, shorter programs are the now typical as colleges respond to both the evolving training needs of companies and to student demand for relevant programs that will lead to gainful employment. Short-duration skills-based programs designed for remote or hybrid delivery and incorporated into career pathways are valuable assets for community colleges seeking to serve stakeholders in both the short and long terms.

Building Stronger Employer Partnerships

The relationship between employers and community colleges is also experiencing changes. Many large, national employers find dealing with one college at a time to be inefficient. In collaborations with multiple community colleges, employers may also have concerns that institutional differences will limit accountability and result in inconsistencies across program outcomes. Their challenge is to ensure that curricula are standardized and meet their training needs while capitalizing on the strengths of community colleges as institutions embedded in their local economies. Employers' expectations for CTE graduates to be resilient, possess technical and employability competencies matched to the job, and, ideally, have related work experience are also affecting the nature of employer-college partnerships. These expectations drive a higher level of employer engagement from recruitment to placement, to identify pertinent competencies and design internships and other work experiences for students.

The JFF-Google Community College Scaling of the IT Certificate

Initiative Overview

The Google IT Support Professional Certificate program represents one important new approach to addressing these challenges. Originally designed by Google to meet its internal needs, the scope was expanded to attract a diverse workforce to the growing IT sector. The principal attraction for community colleges to offer the Google IT Certificate was to introduce an entry point for adults to prepare for high-demand, entry-level careers in information technology. The curriculum was developed to be self-paced, of limited duration, and offered through Coursera, an experienced online education provider. Each of the five courses in the program build specific competencies to be mastered. A certificate of completion is awarded to those who complete all five courses and successfully pass key assessments.

Rather than providing the Google IT Certificate to community colleges directly, Google partnered with JFF to establish a network of colleges to deliver the program nationally. JFF's knowledge of community college operations was instrumental in providing the necessary support to implement the program, and its reputation and previous work with community colleges brought credibility to the project. Recognizing that that this new certificate needed to be “seeded” with employers, Google developed a national consortium of employers willing to interview and hire successful program completers.

Emerging Impact of the Initiative

Data from community colleges participating in the two-year pilot point to the efficacy of the Google IT Certificate and its impact on nonwhite and female students. Of the 4,497 total students enrolled, 2,902 completed at least one course; 1,325 completed all five courses required to earn the certificate; and 1,952 are still enrolled and have not yet earned the certificate. At the colleges reporting statistics on race, 59 percent of the enrolled students were white, and 41 percent were Black or Hispanic (split about evenly between the two). While women hold only 26 percent of computing-related jobs in the United States, they represented 37 percent of the enrolled Google IT Certificate learners.^{1,2}

Completers were surveyed and asked to identify tangible benefits from having earned the certificate. Of the 806 surveys returned, 103 respondents said that the certificate helped them find new employment; 132 reported increased earnings; and 176 reported other positive

outcomes, such as landing an internship, improving their candidacy for future positions, starting a business, and enhancing skills in their current position.

While the original intent of the training program continues to drive community colleges' interest in offering it, the experiences of the first 100 colleges the JFF-Google partnership served provide insights into broader applications and into the certificate's value as an agent for change.

Leveraging Distinctive Features of the Google IT Certificate to Serve Community Colleges

Unique features of the Google IT Support Professional Certificate present both advantages and challenges to community colleges and program participants. The certificate training, designed for remote delivery, is platform agnostic, meaning that program completers are prepared for entry-level positions at a variety of companies, not just Google. Google IT employees representing diverse populations deliver modularized content using short videos and vignettes. Other instructional methodologies include interactive exercises, assessments, readings, and supplemental materials. Employability skills such as communication and problem solving are also integrated into the five courses of the certificate training.

The Google IT Certificate training program is positioned to serve community colleges and their students in several ways:

- **Remote delivery.** The ability to deliver training remotely became a necessity during the pandemic, but demand for flexible models was already growing among adults juggling multiple priorities. Although synchronous academic activities such as office hours and group tutoring are offered, the Google IT Certificate program is designed to enable learners to proceed at their own pace, on their own schedules.
- **Skills-based learning.** Employers are increasingly demanding that new hires have some hands-on experience. In some communities, certificate earners who also participated in internships were better positioned to meet employer demands than those who completed the certificate program without additional training or experience. The Google project is competency-based and prioritizes the development of both technical IT skills as well as baseline skills.
- **Curriculum choices.** As a standalone, competency-based program, the Google IT Certificate meets individual colleges' needs for both credit-bearing and noncredit workforce programs. Colleges can incorporate the program in a variety of ways, such as

by requiring it at the beginning of an IT program sequence to teach fundamentals, or at the end to reinforce learning and job readiness; incorporating it into courses preparing students for CompTIA A+ certification; aiding in career exploration for undecided college students or high school students; and supporting dual enrollment for traditional high schools and career academies. Some colleges saw value in offering the courses as electives in non-IT pathways such as engineering, logistics, business, or health IT because the foundational knowledge crosses disciplines.

- **Career pathways.** The long-term value of isolated short-term certificate training programs has yet been to be studied. However, research has shown that providing career pathways—and allowing learners to reenter the pathway to gain new skills as needed, without losing credit—can have a positive impact on student success. The certificate is appropriate for both scenarios if incorporated into a defined career pathway.
- **Faculty and staff development.** The certificate is well suited for incorporation into a college’s professional development program. Program flexibility and an engaging curriculum make it attractive to faculty and staff members as well as to students, and the costs are nominal.
- **Closing of equity gaps.** Not only has the pandemic negatively affected community college enrollments, but it has deepened racial, ethnic, and income equity gaps. U.S. Census Bureau survey data analyzed by the Community College Research Center showed that as of October 2020, nearly half of low-income students had canceled community college plans, compared with approximately 15 percent of high-income students. In addition, minority households were more likely to experience financial pressures that resulted in enrollment delays.³ The Google IT Certificate program supports community college efforts to close these income-related gaps by eliminating barriers to entry and by providing content appropriate for those without prior IT knowledge. A standalone certificate that is respected by employers and can be obtained at a pace set by the learner helps level the playing field for students of color, who may lack the social capital to obtain employment.
- **Cost-effectiveness.** The technology-enhanced, Google-developed curriculum is a cost-effective alternative for colleges challenged to balance instructional quality with the allocation of scarce resources. The model allows faculty members to focus on supporting learners rather than on designing academic content.
- **Increased visibility.** Offering a program and certification linked to a nationally known company increases the visibility of a community college in its local community. It can also increase access to employers affiliated with the growing IT sector, and boost opportunities for such employers to increase their use of local community colleges as talent pipelines.

- **WIOA alignment.** The certificate training aligns well with workforce services and training programs funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Community colleges can incorporate the certificate training into their eligible training programs funded by WIOA and then serve as a resource available to the public workforce system.

The Google Certificate: Leveraging Institutional Change

The Google IT Certificate can serve as a lever for improvement and for transformative change to community college workforce programming. One reason for that is that the Google IT Certificate is an employer-driven curriculum. Typically, faculty members are responsible for curriculum development. In the case of the Google IT Certificate, however, a major company with deep technical skills and financial resources has developed and continues to revise the curriculum. It also helps community colleges address the significant challenge of maintaining instructional currency, given the increasing speed of technological change, and frees faculty members to focus on instruction rather than instructional design.

Supporting Employer Partnerships

In addition, the fact that the Google IT Certificate represents a quality, standardized workforce program developed with employer input is apt to appeal to many potential employers. Although community colleges have a longstanding history of serving local workforce needs, curriculum content is often developed without employer input or is repurposed based on an existing curriculum. Google's involvement validates the relevance of the training. If employers have a positive experience through this model, it could change how workforce curricula are developed in the future. Additionally, participating colleges are well positioned to work with other national partners.

The certificate changes the nature of employer partnerships, with higher levels of involvement across the cycle, from curriculum development through job placement. Most large companies have not engaged with community colleges directly for their workforce training because of the costs associated with negotiating individual agreements with colleges. The Google IT Certificate program's approach opens up the possibility for more collaborations among community colleges within particular metropolitan and rural areas to address the needs of major national firms.

Facilitating Collaboration – Within and Across Institutions

Since the Google project works primarily within a consortium model, the colleges gain experiences in a peer learning model by which new ideas and concepts can be passed on from one institution to another, increasing the depth and sophistication of workforce development. Of the 102 colleges participating in the JFF pilot, 72 percent were part of regional or statewide consortia. This development also suggests a new pattern of delivery for community colleges: institutional collaboration around a common curriculum.

Similarly, the need for stronger integration between credit and noncredit workforce programming has become increasingly apparent due to the economic consequences of COVID-19. Because the Google IT Certificate is a self-contained online program, it can be implemented in both credit and noncredit divisions and reinforce the growing trend to emphasize the collaboration between these areas of the college, resulting in a more efficient use of talent and other resources.

Creating Opportunities for Innovative Funding Mechanisms

The flexibility of the curriculum itself permits some innovative funding mechanisms that would allow for *braided funding*— combining college resources with federal and state workforce funds. In addition, because the certificate program’s design discourages traditional access barriers and is achievable for many adults who lack college experience, it supports the equity agenda and is attractive to many foundations and other private sector funders.

Supporting Expansion of Competency-based Programs

Students benefit from the curriculum design as well. The participating colleges demonstrated that a structured, competency-based curriculum delivered primarily online and coupled with necessary student supports could successfully serve adult students with little or no prior college education. Adults may be able to complete this program and still maintain their current work schedules, making this an ideal option for incumbent workers. This experience could lead to the development of additional competency workforce programs and more remote training delivery with supports.

Relevant Resources

Vanessa Bennett and Sara Lamback, *Transforming IT Training Programs Into Successful Career On-Ramps* (Boston: JFF, 2020), <https://www.jff.org/resources/transforming-it-programs-successful-career-ramps/>

Charlotte Cahill, *Making Work-Based Learning Work* (Boston: JFF, 2016), <https://www.jff.org/resources/making-work-based-learning-work/>

S. Gallagher, et al., *Designing and Implementing Work-Based Learning: A Call to Action for CHROs* (Boston: Northeastern University, 2019), <https://www.bhef.com/publications/designing-and-implementing-work-based-learning-call-action-chros>

Matthew Poland, Randall Wilson, and Fran Kennedy, *Work-Based Learning System Development Guide* (Boston: JFF, 2017), <https://www.jff.org/resources/work-based-learning-system-development-guide/>

Endnotes

¹ Sam Daly, “Women in Tech Statistics for 2020 (and How We Can Do Better),” Built In, March 13, 2020, <https://builtin.com/women-tech/women-in-tech-workplace-statistics>

² Note: This percentage may be higher, given that 640 of learners did not indicate gender or checked “other” on their application.

³ Clive Belfield and Thomas Brock, “Behind the Enrollment Numbers: How COVID Has Changed Students’ Plans for Community College,” Community College Research Center, November 19, 2020, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/covid-enrollment-community-college-plans.html/>