

## Degrees of Speed

Millions of unemployed Americans need to upgrade their skills, fast. Community colleges aren't up to the task, but with help from Washington, they could be.

By [Jamie P. Merisotis](#) and [Stan Jones](#)



Late registration: David Stark, a laid-off auto parts assembly plant worker, retrain as a computer technician at the Tennessee Technology Center campus in Hohenwald, Tennessee.

ast year, at the height of the recession, America's unemployment rate

**L** hit 10.2 percent, slightly lower than the 10.8 percent peak of the previous major recession in the early 1980s. But the recent crisis is likely to prove far more unforgiving for the nearly 15 million Americans who are still out of work. After the economy began to turn around in late 1982, a substantial portion of the unemployed returned to their old jobs, or at least to jobs in their previous occupations. That's less likely to happen this time around. The reason is that in recent years companies have learned to use economic slumps as opportunities to restructure—to close less-efficient facilities, drop less-profitable product lines, or extract themselves altogether from businesses that aren't making money. What that means is that those who have become unemployed in this recession haven't just lost their jobs; they've likely lost their careers. The skills that once earned them a living—assembling automobiles, processing mortgages, writing newspaper stories—are no longer much in demand in the marketplace. If these Americans hope to work again at anything approaching a middle-class wage, they'll need to acquire new skills.

A lot of them are trying. We've seen a surge in enrollment at community colleges and for-profit colleges and trade schools since 2008, as unemployed adults and recent high school graduates unable to find work go back to school. In general, this is a good thing. As the current recovery picks up steam, new jobs will be created—slowly, perhaps, but surely—and economists already have a reasonably good fix on what those jobs will be and the skill levels they'll require. Looking at federal government and other data, Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce forecast that about 47 million jobs will become available over the next decade, as workers in existing jobs retire and as newly created jobs come on line. About 30 million of these new positions will require a postsecondary education. Of those, 14 million will demand only a two-year associate's degree, a one-year certificate, or some college training short of a bachelor's degree. These "middle skill" occupations include jobs in information technology (network managers), business services (managing temp workers, running institutional food operations), and especially health care (nurses, nurse assistants, medical technicians). Starting salaries range from about \$25,000 to more than \$40,000 and can grow substantially from there. In fact, about 30 percent of people with one- and two-year college credentials earn more than people with bachelor's degrees.

For a substantial portion of today's unemployed, then, one- and two-year college credentials offer a viable route back to the American dream. There are a lot of obstacles, however, standing between a jobless adult and a college degree. Even the cheapest college education costs money, something most unemployed people—living on savings or credit cards—don't have a lot of. And the existing institutions that offer one- and two-year diplomas, primarily community colleges and for-profit schools, sometimes make the task of actually getting one far harder than it needs to be. Fortunately, there is a model college program already up and running in Tennessee that combines the best qualities of for-profit and community colleges to make it much easier for the unemployed to earn the credentials

they need. And with an investment of federal money, much of which is already in the budget, that model could be spread nationwide. Politicians and the public agree that Washington should be focusing its energies on the unemployment crisis. Giving those who have lost their jobs better options to upgrade their skills is something Washington can actually do, and quickly, without breaking the federal bank.

**C**ommunity colleges have been getting a great deal of attention lately, especially from the Obama administration, and for understandable reasons. At a time of soaring higher education costs, community colleges (average annual tuition: \$2,361) are a relatively inexpensive means of providing large numbers of Americans with the higher skills they and the economy need. Community colleges are open to everybody and have done a wonderful job helping many Americans of humble backgrounds (including Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, actor-director Clint Eastwood, Costco CEO Jim Sinegal, and newscaster Jim Lehrer) get an education. They also serve a diverse population. If you are a retiree interested in taking a creative-writing class, an immigrant wanting to improve your English, or a recent high school graduate looking to garner college credits inexpensively before transferring to a four-year institution, community college is the place for you.

If you're out of work, however, it may not be, for a simple but vexing reason: time. The unemployed need to earn a degree quickly, so they can get back into the workforce. But speed is not the defining quality of most higher education institutions, including community colleges. It takes the average community college student five years to complete a two-year associate's degree, and four years to earn a one-year certificate.

Why the molasses-like pace? Part of the reason is that many students—especially recent high school graduates but also a fair number of adults—begin community college with such academic skill deficits that they have to take remedial classes before beginning their college-level coursework. A bigger reason, however, is that most colleges and universities, community colleges included, see themselves as academic institutions first and workforce-training centers second, and they structure their curricula accordingly. Even community college students headed for job-oriented degrees—in, say, landscape technology—must pass an array of general education courses in math, English, science, and the humanities. These courses are vitally important in providing students, especially recent high school graduates, with the critical thinking and communication skills they'll need to succeed in today's demanding economy. But they don't necessarily make sense for the many recently unemployed adults who have already developed such skills during their years in the workplace. Community colleges also typically schedule their courses at the sort of times—Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:40 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.; Wednesdays from 6 to 10 p.m.—that make it extremely difficult to amass the right credits in the right sequence to graduate on time—especially if you're unemployed and have children or other adult responsibilities.

The longer it takes to get a degree, the fewer people get one, notes education and training consultant Brian Bosworth, because students lose heart and "life intervenes." Not surprisingly, completion rates are even lower in community colleges than they are in four-year colleges. Nationwide, only 23 percent of full-time community college students graduate in three years or less. Community colleges point out, rightly, that this figure doesn't fully reflect their success rates; if you measure over six years and count students who transfer to and later graduate from four-year schools without receiving a community college degree, then community college graduation rates are closer to 40 percent. That's a more impressive figure, to be sure, but still not stellar.

Those who do manage to earn one- or two-year degrees are usually in a much better position to get a job—but how *much* better is hard to say, because few states require community colleges to track the career paths of their graduates, even though the data are available. Nor do community colleges do much to help their graduates find employment. "At community colleges you don't generally have people whose job it is to place students," says Davis Jenkins of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College.

With odds like these, it's natural that many unemployed people turn to for-profit schools like ITT Technical Institute, Bryant & Stratton College, or the University of Phoenix. These institutions heavily market their ability to do what community colleges don't: help students get degrees quickly and place them in good jobs. And they are better organized to deliver on that promise. Typically, for-profit schools use "block scheduling," in which students take only one or two classes at a time before moving on to the next block. Classes are usually held at regular and consistent hours—say, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. every day—making it possible for students juggling families and part-time jobs to build their schedules around their schoolwork. And the academics tend to be integrated into the job-oriented curricula. For instance, if you're working toward a licensed practical nursing degree, you won't be required to first pass an algebra course. Instead, instructors teach you the specific equations you'll need to know to pass your state licensing exam and to work in the field. Designing the curricula this way boosts the chances that students will succeed. Graduation rates for one- and two-year degree programs at for-profit colleges are 56 percent, substantially higher than at community colleges.

But there are problems with some of these schools, beginning with price. The average tuition at a for-profit college is about \$14,000 annually, nearly six times more than at community colleges, and some charge as much as \$25,000 a year. Students attending these schools often tap out their available government grants and loans. Some even wind up taking out private loans with double-digit interest rates and stiff terms. And while the best trade schools provide a solid education and help students graduate quickly and find decent jobs, the worst offer subpar training and have terrible graduation and job placement records.

**W**hat the unemployed really need are public institutions that combine the best qualities of both types of schools: the low cost and public mission of community colleges, and the quicker-to-graduation curricula and job-placement focus of the best proprietary schools. A handful of education systems around the country—in Ohio, Wisconsin, New York, and Washington State, for example—have attempted to build such programs. The most successful may be in Tennessee.

Whereas community colleges in most states offer both one-year certificate and two-year degree programs, Tennessee split these functions into different institutions when creating its community college system back in the 1960s. As a result, the state operates thirteen academically oriented community colleges as well as a separate system of twenty-seven Technology Centers. These Tech Centers specialize in one-year certifications in high-demand fields like accounting, diesel-powered equipment, computer networking, drafting and CAD technology, industrial electricity, licensed practical nursing, and dental assisting. Students pay about the same tuition—around \$2,400 per year—as do Tennessee's community college students (tuition covers about 30 percent of the cost of the training at the Tech Centers; the state picks up the rest). But in terms of how they structure and deliver an education, the Tech Centers more closely resemble for-profit trade schools. Academic lessons are woven into the instruction rather than taught in separate courses. Classes are scheduled in blocks and at convenient hours, and students move through them as a group, increasing the chances that they will learn from each other (a phenomenon known to education experts as the "cohort effect"). The Tech Centers also offer rotations and apprenticeships for their students with employers in the state, and a data system that tracks where and when students land their first jobs and at what starting salary level—information that helps the school fine-tune its courses to make sure the skills they are teaching are the ones the market actually needs.

The results are impressive. About 75 percent of students who enroll at Tech Centers graduate, and 83 percent of those graduates get jobs in their fields of study and are still in those jobs a year later. Tech Centers, in other words, outperform most for-profit schools, and do so at a fraction of the cost.

**I**f such schools can operate throughout an entire state, there's no reason that they can't do so throughout the country. And there are actions Washington can take now to encourage more states to follow Tennessee's lead. Buried in the recently passed health care reconciliation bill is \$2 billion for a grant program for community colleges, over which the Obama administration enjoys considerable discretion. The president should announce that in distributing these grants, his administration will give priority to community colleges that reengineer their one- and two-year degree programs to stress timely graduation, job placement, and tracking the careers of those who graduate. A great deal of reform can be leveraged through this approach, as the administration has shown in its Race to the Top program, which applies similar tactics to K–12 education. The leaders

of several large community college systems have told us that with proper funding they can have accelerated degree programs up and running in six months. This means, we estimate, that hundreds of thousands of unemployed Americans could be enrolled in such programs within two years.

Taking advantage of these new opportunities, however, will be tough for many cash-strapped people who have lost their jobs. Under the rules of unemployment insurance, which has been extended to millions more people since the financial crisis hit, recipients must confirm that they are actively looking for work and generally are not allowed to enroll in college. Last year, the president urged states to loosen these restrictions. But lawmakers can, and should, go much further. The next time they extend unemployment benefits, they should mandate that anyone eligible also has the right to attend college, as long as they're enrolled full-time in a one- or two-year degree program.

And what about the millions of Americans who've lost their jobs but don't qualify for unemployment benefits? For them, the federal government should create a new program of educational stipends. These would be modest payments to help offset the tuition and living costs of going back to school for a year or two. In effect, the stipend would become their "pay" while they are completing their "job" of getting a high-quality, workforce-ready education.

The nation has invested hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars to ensure that banks, automobile manufacturers, and other large corporations emerge from the recession on a sound footing. But with unemployment now representing a major long-term challenge for the country, why can't we invest a fraction of those sums directly in the future of the workers who are the backbone of our economy? Giving unemployed Americans the opportunity to quickly upgrade their skills in high-demand job fields and get back to supporting their families with middle-class wages is a reasonable and appropriate goal for the country.



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