



ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR
COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

Building a Future-Ready Workforce:

Highlighting Best Practices in ACCJC Member Institutions

Introduction

Building a future-ready workforce requires deepening the partnership between industry and education. As industries evolve, educators are partnering to address the skills gap to create a workforce with specialized, adaptable skill sets required in today's dynamic economy. Workforce partnerships that align education with real-time labor market demands will move the U.S. economy forward and provide significant growth opportunity for both students and industry alike. ACCJC member institutions exemplify the best in these collaborations and are uniquely positioned to respond swiftly to industry needs and contribute to a thriving U.S. economy.

Background

Workforce development is foundational to community colleges in the United States. Two-year institutions were created to provide critical education in response to the growing demand for skilled labor during the industrialization era.¹ Today, community colleges educate nearly half of all undergraduate students in the U.S., many of whom aim to enter the workforce directly after graduation.²

Over the decades, community colleges have grown into central pillars of American economic prosperity by offering career training, adult education, and academic transfer pathways tailored to regional labor markets. Two-year institutions contribute approximately \$809 billion annually to the U.S. economy, much of it through workforce-aligned training programs to meet regional labor needs.³ Despite this long-standing role, a persistent mismatch remains between what many traditional educational programs offer and what employers require. Community college-industry partnerships help close this gap by modernizing curricula and incorporating additional applied learning opportunities that prepare students for in-demand careers.⁴

Over 70 percent of community colleges report having formal partnerships with local employers to support workforce development programs.⁵

Key Features of Effective Workforce Partnerships

In successful workforce partnerships, employers are active participants in curriculum design, classroom instruction, and program evaluation. Programs are generally tailored to high-demand fields such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, IT, and logistics; however, these partnerships also provide the perfect environment for innovation and expansion into new fields.

¹ Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2002). *The American community college* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

² American Association of Community Colleges. (2020). *Fast facts 2020*.

³ Economic Modeling Specialists Intl. (EMSI) & AACC, *Where Value Meets Values* (2022)

⁴ Community College Research Center. (2019). *The Evolving Mission of Workforce Development in the Community College*.

⁵ American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), *Fast Facts 2023*.

And, while a degree is a goal for most, many of the partnerships involve modular programs that allow students to build competencies and credentials that can spur earnings and career advancement.⁶ Internships, apprenticeships, and co-op programs give students hands-on experience that enhances classroom instruction and builds industry-relevant competencies. Lastly, workforce partnerships demonstrate institutions' ability to launch or adapt programs based on emerging industry needs.

The benefits of workforce partnerships are evident. Employers gain access to a pipeline of job-ready workers with relevant skills. Students access affordable pathways to high-wage, high-demand careers. Communities thrive due to economic development, reduced unemployment, and greater social mobility.

ACCJC Member Partnerships

ACCJC member institutions engage in hundreds of partnership programs spanning a broad range of sectors and arrangements, each of which demonstrate the vital role community colleges play in maintaining and growing a strong economy.

These partnerships span a broad number of sectors, including healthcare, industrial trades, manufacturing, utilities, public safety, technology, engineering, education, transportation, hospitality, agriculture, and graphic design.

California Community Colleges, which make up 83 percent of ACCJC membership, are the largest workforce development and training provider in the United States and, to date, have trained more than 96,000 registered apprentices.⁷

While each program in ACCJC's membership is compelling, this paper focuses on five robust partnerships that highlight the innovation, responsiveness, and community connection of our member institutions.

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor. (2022). *Employer Perspectives on Workforce Partnerships*.

⁷ California Community Colleges. (2025). *California Community Colleges Closing in on 100,000 Registered Apprenticeships this National Apprenticeship Day*.

Imperial Valley College

Lithium is critically important to modern technology; however, the global lithium supply is limited, and it is becoming increasingly strategic due to rising demand. [Imperial Valley College](#) (IVC) serves students in California’s rural and economically challenged Salton Sea region where a recent study by the U.S. Department of Energy found enough available lithium resource to “meet or exceed global demand for decades.”⁸

[Lithium Industry Force Training \(LIFT the Valley\)](#)⁹ is a newly created program at IVC funded by the U.S. Department of Energy in conjunction with [EnergySource Minerals](#) (ESM) to establish an Industrial Assessment Center (IAC) capable of driving innovation in clean energy workforce development and supporting regional manufacturing practices. The U.S. Department of Energy has awarded a total of **\$1.79 million over a three-year period** to support the development and implementation of the LIFT initiative.

LIFT the Valley offers three one-year certificate training programs (Plant Operator, Chemical Lab Technician, Instrumentation Technician). The curriculum is aligned with industry standards and Imperial County’s [Lithium Valley Specific Plan](#). **One hundred seventy-six students will be enrolled in IAC-supported courses over the life of the project, with a target of 144 program completions**, with ESM and other companies hiring directly from the program. Since the program’s launch, IVC has enrolled 91 students across the first two programs (Plant Operator and Chemical Lab Technician), **exceeding the enrollment target by 38 percent**. The college is on track to meet the goal of 144 completions by the end of the three-year grant period.

The median hourly wage of the students currently employed is significantly above the median hourly wage in Imperial County, indicating strong return on investment and wage mobility for graduates.

⁸ U.S. Department of Energy. (2023, November). *Improved Quantification of Lithium Resources in the Salton Sea Region*.

⁹ Acknowledgment: This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Energy’s Office of Manufacturing and Supply Chains (MESCC) Award Number DE-MS0000049

Carrington College

[Carrington College](#) provides career-focused degrees and certificates in healthcare, industrial trades, and industrial majors to a diverse population of students in more than a dozen campuses across the Western United States. The college's workforce partnerships are many, but none are as impactful as those promoting the health of people in the communities they serve.

Carrington's partnership with [Pacific Dental Services](#) (PDS Health) gives students in Carrington's Dental Assisting program financial support and externship opportunities. While the community benefits from free dental care, students are offered world-class training in patient care, office duties, and laboratory procedures, preparing students to provide critical support to dental practices. **Carrington's Dental Assisting Associate Degree program reports a 100 percent rate of completion**, and to enhance hands-on training in the program, PDS Health pledged \$10,000 toward the acquisition of vital equipment to keep education at the cutting edge of technology and broadening students' post-graduation career opportunities.

Carrington's partners also include [Renown Health](#), a major healthcare provider in Northern Nevada. Students in the College's Associate Degree in Nursing program participate in clinical rotations at Renown Health facilities, gaining valuable hands-on experience and pathways to employment. Much like the Dental Assisting program, **the Health Studies/Registered Nursing/Nursing Bridge Associate Degree programs report a 100% completion rate.**

College of the Redwoods

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or [CAL FIRE](#), is responsible for fire protection of more than 31 million acres of land under state responsibility. California faces an ongoing threat of catastrophic wildfire, putting firefighters in high demand. After years of understaffing, CAL FIRE has partnered with [College of the Redwoods](#) to expand its existing Fire Service Training and established new partnerships with the Humboldt County Fire Instructors Association (HCFIA) and CAL FIRE.

The Fire Technology Program, which includes an Associate of Science degree and transfer curriculum, is guided and supported by a Fire Technology Advisory Committee that helps to identify the needs of state and local fire agencies. The college also offers California Fire Service Training and Education System (CFSTES) and Fire Service Training and Education Program (FSTEP) courses at the request of the region's first responders. While the emphasis of the Fire Technology program is on initial training, existing firefighters can earn additional certifications, enhance their skills, improve their hiring prospects, and create pathways for career advancement.

Firefighting jobs in the region are projected to increase by **10 percent** over the next five years, with a projected 181 job openings for these occupations each year.¹⁰ **In academic year 2024-25, 90 percent of its students completed the program, and to date, every graduate who has applied to CAL FIRE has received a job offer.** The average CAL FIRE Firefighter salary in California is around \$78,000 per year, well above the region's median annual income of approximately \$60,000 per year.

The college's collaboration with CAL FIRE is an innovative partnership that will make College of the Redwoods a central hub for fire service education, serving as the primary educational center for firefighters across the region.

¹⁰ Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research. (2023). *Entry-Level Firefighting Careers in California: A labor market analysis*.

College of the Marshall Islands

Located in the Northwestern Pacific Ocean, the Marshall Islands is the home to the second largest ship registry in the world and a pivotal location in international shipping, yet the labor participation rate is just 48.9 percent. At the forefront of promoting sustainability in the maritime industry, the [College of the Marshall Islands](#) (CMI) has developed partnerships that address the critical needs of international shipping and prepare students for careers in domestic, regional and international maritime shipping and fisheries industries.

In 2022, CMI partnered with the Marshall Islands Shipping Corporation (MISC) to address the national shortage of skilled workers in the maritime industry and developed the [Micronesian Center for Sustainable Transport](#), which promotes long-term decarbonization of the Pacific through research and empowerment of Pacific nations to adopt sustainable practices.

[The Maritime Vocational Training Center \(MVTC\)](#) provides workforce development training for in-service sailors ranging from basic sea safety refreshers to more advanced subjects, as well as a Certificate of Completion in Rating Forming Part of a Navigation Watch and a Certificate of Completion in Rating Forming Part of an Engine Room Watch. Developed with MISC through an industry advisory committee, the curriculum includes one semester of basics and a traditional seafaring course that provides students with knowledge and perspective as to their role in the long-standing and rich culture of maritime activities in the Marshall Islands. During the following two semesters, instruction is specialized to a specific area of study, with the final semester including twelve weeks on board a ship.

Graduates work as Entry Level Seamen with the possibility of promotion to Third Mate following the conclusion of a probationary period, with some hired out of the program as Deckhand, Second Mate, or First Engineer.

Merritt College

Histotechnology is the use of special equipment and staining techniques for the detection and diagnosis of tissue abnormalities; it plays a crucial role in diagnosing various diseases, including cancer, infectious diseases, and autoimmune disorders. [Merritt College](#), located in Oakland, California, offers a robust Histotechnology program with deep ties to local industry and access to extensive real-world experience.

The Merritt College Histotechnology Program prepares students to enter the workforce as qualified, employable histotechnicians in health care, academia, biotech, and biopharma. The program provides technical training, focusing on tissue sample preparation, special stains and techniques, light microscopy, and genomics. As part of their formal training, and as a requirement for histotechnician certification, students participate in work experience and apprenticeships with local facilities, such as Genentech, UCSF Health, and Exact Sciences, a molecular diagnostic company with more than 6,500 employees across the country. The college's industry partners provide further training for those interested in research or careers in the private sector.

The [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) projects a 13% growth in demand for histotechnicians in California. Starting pay for the industry ranges from \$35-\$45 per hour, and employment opportunities include long-term positions at hospitals and universities, traveling histotechnician positions, and employment in biopharmaceutical and biotechnology industries.

During the academic year 2023-2024, the Merritt College Bioscience Department awarded 50 Certificates of Achievement, with the full Histotechnician training program reporting an 89 percent graduation rate. **For academic years 2021-22 and 2022-23, both graduation rate and placement rate were an impressive 100 percent.** This successful program plays an important role in connecting students to well-paying careers in an expanding and necessary field.

Challenges

Workforce partnerships between industry and community colleges offer many benefits, but they also face significant challenges that can limit their effectiveness if not addressed. These challenges are structural, cultural, financial, and logistical in nature. ACCJC member institutions referred to some of those barriers in their responses to our survey.

Community colleges often operate within complex administrative systems that are slow to adapt. Updating curricula, hiring industry-experienced faculty, or launching new programs can take years. Of almost universal concern among ACCJC member institutions surveyed was funding. Workforce partnerships often rely on temporary grants and lack sustainable funding sources for long-term success.¹¹

Of particular interest was the near-universal challenge of infrastructure capacity on both sides of the partnership. A lack of staffing and supplemental resources stifles expansion and growth. Often, it is a matter of industry demand outpacing infrastructure capabilities and funding at the prospective partner colleges. Additionally, some potential industry partners have a need for skilled workers but lack the internal bandwidth to create and foster partnerships with local colleges. Many employers, especially small and mid-sized businesses, lack the time, resources, or incentives to engage in long-term partnerships or curriculum development.¹²

For students, participation in programs that are not eligible for Pell Grants and other funding severely restricts their access. Internships, apprenticeships, and other experiential learning often require unpaid or low-paid participation, which poses a barrier for students who need to work full-time or lack transportation and childcare.¹³ The expansion of Pell Grants to include shorter certificates would greatly expand student participation in programs and accelerate industry growth.

Underserved populations, including low-income individuals, veterans, single parents, rural residents, and justice-involved individuals, face a unique and often compounding set of challenges in workforce partnerships between industry and community colleges. These barriers reduce access to training and limit job outcomes central to many workforce development efforts. Many underserved students lack exposure to high-demand career pathways or guidance on how to navigate workforce programs, especially if they are first-generation college students.¹⁴

¹¹ U.S. Department of Labor. (2016). *TAACCCT Evaluation Synthesis Report*.

¹² National Skills Coalition. (2020). *Closing the Digital Skill Divide*.

¹³ Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2020). *Making Work-Based Learning Work for All*.

¹⁴ Center for American Progress. (2019). *A New Course for Higher Education*.

Opportunities

Community colleges with strong employer partnerships report job placement rates 15–20 percent higher for graduates in technical and applied programs compared to institutions without such ties.¹⁵ Several industry sectors are projected to expand their workforce partnerships with community colleges due to evolving labor demands, technological advancement, and the need for rapid workforce upskilling. These sectors typically require middle-skill jobs that demand more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree, which aligns well with the strengths of community colleges. Federal initiatives supporting apprenticeship programs and workforce partnerships¹⁶ are investments in economic growth and innovation.

ACCJC member institutions expressed interest in expanding offerings in Cybersecurity, AI, Water Technologies, Advanced Manufacturing, Public Safety, and in-demand Industrial Trades. Interest in Competency-Based Education and Credit for Prior Learning also drives decision making at the institutional level.

The return on investment (ROI) for students who participate in workforce partnerships is significantly positive, especially in career and technical education and programs aligned with in-demand industries. Students in these programs often earn \$4 to \$12 for every dollar invested in their education, depending on the field.¹⁷ **In California, for every dollar spent on community college-industry workforce partnerships, local economies gain more than \$11 in return.**¹⁸

Recommendations

In order to support and expand this vital component of a healthy economy, federal and state governments must expand funding for workforce education partnerships. Employer investment can be encouraged through tax incentives and matching grants.

Accreditors can encourage flexibility in program approval timelines and competency-based education (CBE) to better align with labor market needs.¹⁹ Traditional accreditation focuses on academic outcomes, but accreditors can promote workforce metrics like job placement and return on investment with member institutions. By encouraging data-driven storytelling, accreditors can support colleges in sharing the successes and possibilities of workforce partnerships with industry leaders, potential students, and the public.

¹⁵ Aspen Institute, *The Workforce Playbook: A Community College Guide to Delivering Excellent Career and Technical Education* (2019)

¹⁶ The White House. (2025, April 23). *Preparing Americans for High-Paying Skilled Trade Jobs of the Future*.

¹⁷ CEW Georgetown. (2024). *The overlooked value of certificates and associate's degrees: What students need to know before they go to college*.

¹⁸ California Community Colleges. (2022) *Fact Sheet: The Economic Value of the California Community College System*.

¹⁹ American Council on Education (ACE). (2020). *Quality Dimensions for Connected Credentials*.

Organizations such as ACCJC and other thought leaders in higher education should promote data sharing to align programs with labor market trends. Additionally, best practices and successful models must be scaled across regions to unify objectives, encourage innovation, and strengthen participation. To best serve all students, institutions and employers need to support underserved populations with wraparound services. Minority populations, rural communities, veterans, and returning students are necessary to the success of partnerships and should be encouraged to participate.

Conclusion

Workforce partnerships with two-year institutions represent a proven, scalable strategy to meet the evolving demands of the 21st-century economy. By continuing to invest in and strengthen these collaborations, the United States can build a more skilled and adaptable workforce ready to thrive in a changing world. ACCJC member institutions are a living embodiment of this vision and are ready to lead the charge in transforming education, industry, and economy.