



Economic Mobility for Adult Learners

Strengthening Short-Term Skills Builder Course Sequences

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Introduction

Community colleges are facing significant shifts in population demographics and regional economies that are upending traditional approaches to recruiting and retaining students.¹ The current enrollment crisis highlights a fundamental service delivery issue: College structures are largely designed for first-time, full-time students. This approach often poses challenges for students balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly in the context of rising inflation, scarce affordable housing, and reduced state funding for education. For many current and potential students, it is not clear that attending college is worth the opportunity costs.

Given the declining number of new high school graduates, many colleges are exploring strategies for attracting more students, including more adult learners.² The number of adults over the age of 24 without a postsecondary credential is much larger than traditional college pipelines that begin directly after high school.³ However, convincing adults to enroll in college and complete programs will require adjusting policies and practices to better align with adult students' priorities.

As colleges seek to grow enrollment of adult learners, one segment of the student population on which community colleges should focus their attention is skills builders: students who typically enroll in colleges for a short period of time, take and successfully complete a handful of career-oriented classes, and frequently translate their coursework into earnings gains. Based on research conducted in California, Colorado, Michigan, and Ohio, roughly one in eight new community college students are skills builders—a sizable population that is often overlooked in college enrollment and success planning. In addition to their share of the overall headcount, most skills builders are adult learners, typically 25 years of age or older. Skills builders may be an especially fruitful population for colleges to engage because these self-motivated learners already have figured out how to navigate the complicated process of applying to and enrolling in college and have successfully completed at least one or two courses. With focused support from colleges, they may be able to continue their education to reap even larger economic gains.

By looking more closely at the people who engage in skills builder course-taking, the types of courses and course

sequences they complete, and how their economic gains vary by program of study, colleges can identify ways to better support the upskilling and reskilling that often are required to stay current and stably employed in rapidly changing regional economies.

This guide provides information about skills builders, offers strategies for growing enrollments and aligning skills builder efforts with other college efforts, and outlines important opportunities to accelerate adult learners toward economic mobility.

About this Practice Guide

This practice guide introduces community college leaders, practitioners, staff, and institutional researchers to *skills builders*, an often-untapped population made up primarily of adult learners. The guide is intended to build collective knowledge about skills builders and support college teams as they explore how strengthening skills builder course sequences can be an enrollment and equity strategy at their college.

This guide:

- Shares what we know about the characteristics of skills builders and their outcomes
- Describes how skills builders can be integrated into the community college reform frameworks like Perkins, WIOA, and Guided Pathways
- Provides ideas for developing high-value skills builder course sequences and changes to college structures to better serve skills builders
- Offers a collection of eight skills builder portraits to illustrate their varying contexts, the outcomes of their course-taking experiences, and the potentially different outcomes that intentional advising could influence

Read a [journal article](#)⁴ that provides detailed documentation on skills builder outcomes.

Read a [companion guide](#) that describes how to identify skills builders and their economic returns.

Understanding Skills Builders

A [recent University of Michigan study](#) examined community college course-taking and labor market outcomes in California, Colorado, Michigan, and Ohio yielding foundational knowledge of who skills builders are, what their course-taking patterns look like, and how experiences and outcomes differ across student characteristics (see sidebar).

In 2022, the University of Michigan, in partnership with WestEd and with funding from ECMC Foundation, followed up with a deeper investigation of skills builders in Colorado and Ohio, their course-taking, and their labor market returns. Findings from both analyses are described below.

Demographics

Age: Skills builders tend to be older and are frequently building upon work experience to acquire new skills that will help increase their earnings or enable them to access more employment opportunities. For example, between one third and one half of skills builders report that they are enrolling in college for nondegree or certificate goals, such as taking courses for job-related purposes.

Race and Gender: White men are overrepresented among skills builders compared to the overall population of most community colleges.

Economic Shocks: The share of skills builders who recently lost a job varies considerably by state. In Colorado, half of skills builders experienced an economic shock immediately before enrolling in college, compared to 20 percent in Ohio.

Skills Builder Profiles

What defines a skills builder?

Students who

- Enroll in community college for a short time (often one to two semesters)
- Take comparatively few credits, usually attending part time
- Take classes mostly in career and technical fields
- Are highly successful in their coursework

What do we know about skills builders?

Skills builders account for between one in seven to one in nine new community college entrants.

While results vary by college and academic discipline, skills builders generally are

- Older than the overall student population
- Disproportionately White men
- First-time college attendees

As a result of their course-taking, skills builders often

- Secure meaningful earnings gains from their short time in college
- Leave college without a credential and without transferring to a four-year institution

These figures may reflect variations in state and regional approaches to structuring job retraining. For example, colleges receiving federal funding as Eligible Training Providers may provide more short-term training opportunities and thus attract more skills builders who have experienced economic shocks. Conversely, we may find fewer skills builders who experienced economic shocks in areas where colleges offer retraining through noncredit coursework. (The skills builder research does not include noncredit students because few state systems have data on this population.) These numbers also may vary based on whether a region experiences a sudden labor market change that causes greater unemployment.

Postsecondary Factors

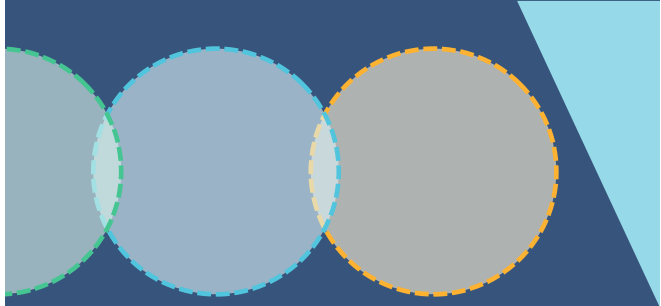
College Experience: There is a prevalent narrative in the United States that people don't need a degree to get a good job. However, studies of the long-term returns to education continue to show that long-term earnings grow with the level of educational attainment.⁵ Short-term programs can generate an immediate boost in pay but rarely lead to economic mobility over time. Relatively few job postings require an associate degree, so students earning a two-year degree may not have a clear pathway to related jobs.⁶ While some programs of study provide more economic benefits than others, students have more options with bachelor's degrees. There are both more jobs that pay living wages and more types of jobs at the bachelor's degree level. Yet, students over the age of 24 are much less likely to earn degrees than younger students, meaning that colleges need to address structural barriers that make it more difficult for adult learners to transfer to four-year institutions.

About one in three Colorado skills builders and just under one in 10 Ohio skills builders have prior experience in college. The skills builders who have attended college previously are more likely to earn a living wage when they enroll in community college and translate their short-term course-taking into better-than-average income gains.

Completion and Transfer: Across states, most skills builders leave community college without earning a certificate or degree and very few transfer to a four-year institution. The notable exception are skills builders in Colorado; Colorado made a policy decision to turn skills builder course sequences into micro-credentials. Almost 40 percent of Colorado skills builders complete a certificate or degree within six years, with a vast majority earning a certificate.

Pathways

Skills builders enroll in courses that align with their upskilling needs and personal interests leading to a large number and variety of skills builder course sequences. Among the 96,000 skills builders in Colorado and Ohio, researchers found more than 30,000 course combinations. Yet, there were some combinations that showed up more frequently. In about half of the students enrolled in a course sequence, at least 10 students had taken the same courses. Skills builder course-taking spanned a range of fields of study, most often engineering, business, health, information technology, precision production, security and protective services, and construction trades. Skills builder course sequences are institution-specific and vary widely across institutions, highlighting the interplay of curriculum, employer partnerships, regional labor markets, and the skills sought by students.



Skills Builder Portraits

At the end of this guide, you'll meet eight skills builders whose employment situations, reasons for taking courses, and earnings differ. They range in age from 22 to 52, and they studied in program areas that included health; engineering, business, and information technologies; manufacturing engineering; and public services and safety, among others.

Each portrait describes the outcome of their course-taking experience: Did they acquire desired skills? Did they gain professional confidence? Did they improve their earnings, or did their course-taking yield zero return?

Each portrait also offers an alternative course-taking option, describing how the skills builder could have further increased their earnings and, in some cases, moved themselves and their family up an economic rung.

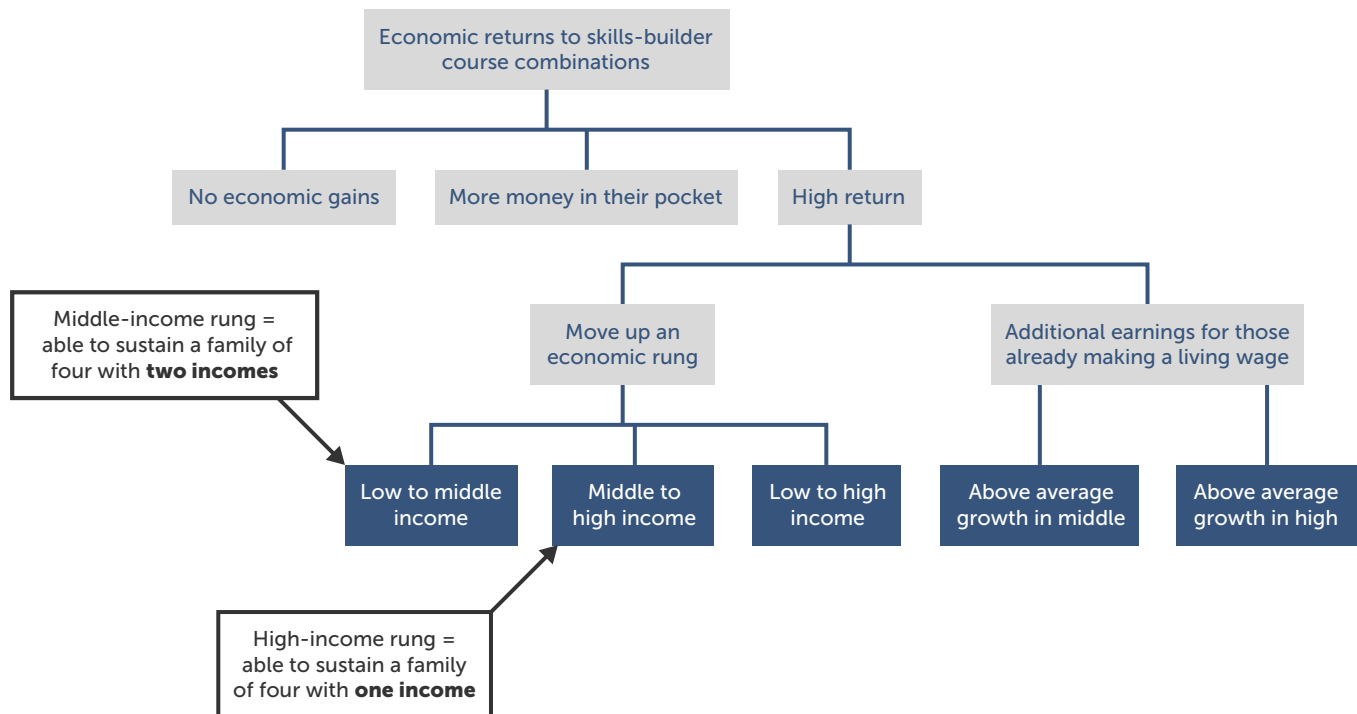
Earnings

By completing one or two courses, skills builders gain job-specific skills and many increase their earnings by several thousand dollars per year. Still, for most students, taking a handful of courses is not enough to achieve meaningful economic mobility.

To clarify the range of economic gains experienced by skills builders, the University of Michigan research team grouped the course sequences based on two characteristics: (1) changes in earnings—whether the earnings of students in a given sequence tended to fall after college, rise but at a below-average rate, or rise at an above-average rate—and (2) meaningful economic movement—whether a pathway resulted in movement between economic rungs. Middle income was defined as earnings sufficient to support a family of four on two incomes, while high income was defined as earnings sufficient to support a family of four on one income. [MIT's Living Wage Calculator](#) was used to determine these thresholds on a county-by-county basis.

Combining information about changes in earnings with information about meaningful economic movement resulted in three broad categories of skills-building sequences: (1) sequences with no economic gains, (2) sequences yielding limited returns (described as “more money in their pocket”), and (3) sequences yielding high returns. The team then subdivided the high-return pathway into categories reflecting different degrees of economic mobility. Some high-return skills builder course sequences resulted in students moving up an economic rung, such as from low- to middle-income status. Others provided above-average growth in earnings to students who already were earning a middle or high income. Figure 1 illustrates how the categories relate to one another.

Figure 1: Types of economic returns for skills builder course sequences



Analysis based on students who entered college between Summer 2007 and Spring 2014 and includes earnings data through Spring 2019.

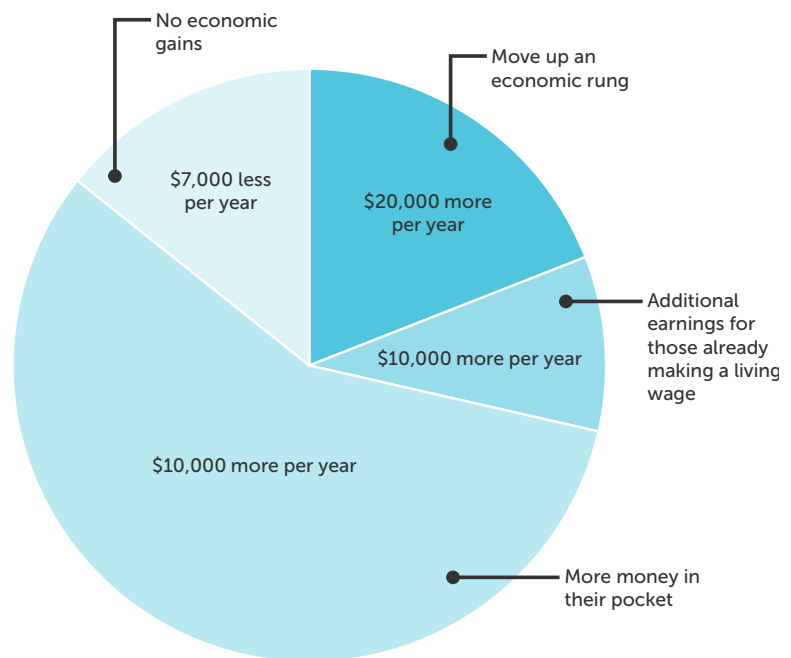
As shown in Figure 2, about two-thirds of skills builders in Ohio had economic returns that fell into the more-money-in-their-pocket category, netting about \$7,000 more per year. The remaining students were fairly evenly split across the categories of no economic gains, move up an economic rung, and additional earnings for those already making a living wage.

Different course sequences—even those within the same academic discipline—often yielded different economic results, pointing to the labor market value of the skills taught in each course as well as the impact of skills builders’ prior education and work experience. These results also varied by region, with specific courses yielding different economic returns in different regions.

Figure 3 provides an illustration of how different courses within the same academic discipline yielded varying economic returns at colleges in Ohio. Students who took a single course in Medical Assisting had no economic gains, perhaps because medical assistant wages generally are low. However, taking a Heart Saver First Aid course, when paired with other skills required for higher-paid health workers, helps skills builders move up an economic rung.

In addition to the specific course that students chose, the number of courses could also influence economic gains. In Ohio, where prior educational experience levels were lower, students who moved up an economic rung took more courses than those who got more money in their pockets (see Figure 4). This reinforces research findings that students have more upward economic mobility when they acquire more skills in college. However, the economic returns to taking additional courses were less apparent in Colorado, where educational experience levels were higher among skills builders.

Figure 2: Economic returns associated with skills builder course sequences in Ohio

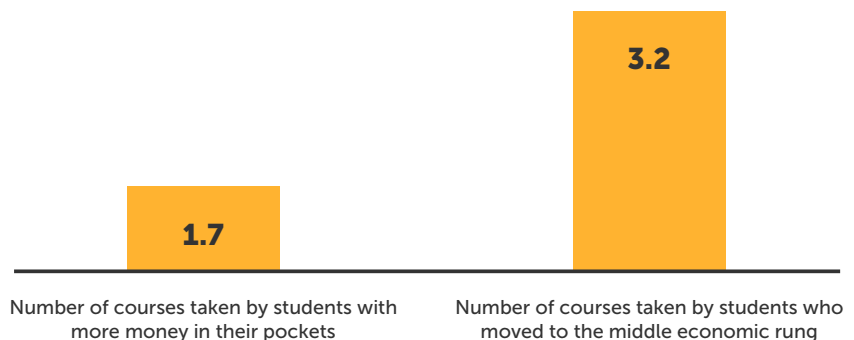


Average earnings rounded to the nearest \$1,000. Figures show differences by comparing earnings immediately after exit and three years later.

Figure 3: Examples of course sequences with different economic returns in Ohio

Field of study	No economic gains	More money in their pockets	Additional earnings for those already making a living wage	Move up an economic rung
Health	Medical/Clinical Assistant	Nurse Aide Training	Health Information Management	Heart Saver First Aid
Precision Production	Environmental Engineering Technology	Scaffolds/High Elevation	Practical Application—Reinforcing	Carpentry Safety + Scaffolds/High Elevation

Figure 4: Number of courses taken compared to economic returns



Applying Skills Builder Findings to Practice

Strategic Enrollment Management

Many career education faculty and deans are familiar with skills builders and frequently work to design short-term training options that address labor market demand. However, general education faculty and college administrators may be less aware of skills builders or unsure how to integrate them into strategic enrollment management. Traditional divides between career education and degree or transfer pathways may further obscure the ways that attending to skills builder concerns could help colleges better serve adult learners—particularly by helping them navigate from short-term training to longer-term education awards that will yield stronger economic gains over time.

By examining skills builders' course-taking patterns (see the related research practice guide on the [Skill Builders page](#) of the WestEd Center for Economic Mobility website) in the context of regional labor market information, community colleges can map out the relationships between the courses they offer and in-demand skills. Further study of both adult learners who already are enrolling in college and those in the local community who may benefit from enrolling can help tailor outreach messages and pathway options.

Below are three examples of how colleges can leverage skills builder course sequences to both grow enrollments and encourage current students to complete credentials.

Skills Builder Expansion: Few colleges advertise their skills builder course sequences or their economic value which means that students may not know about these opportunities. If a college documents strong economic gains and sufficient labor market demand for a particular sequence, it can market that sequence, its potential economic returns, and its connection to certificate and degree pathways.

Illustrative Scenario: A two-course sequence of Accounting Principles I and II yields average earnings gains of \$19,000—enough money that a student making minimum wage could partner with another wage earner to support a family of four. These courses may be particularly attractive to adults in low-wage

Strengthening Connections Among Colleges, Students, and Communities

It's a win-win-win approach.

Community colleges can attract and leverage skills builders to fill empty seats, while playing a critical role in helping to address equity gaps in the incomes of working adults.

Skills builders can pursue certificates and degrees that increase their skills, employment opportunities, earning potential, and career advancement.

Local economies are strengthened as companies can hire highly qualified workers to meet their labor needs.

jobs that require ancillary bookkeeping skills, such as cosmetology or home-based childcare. Given that many regions are struggling to find enough accountants and auditors, increasing the number of students building the relevant skills will help to address labor shortages, particularly if students are given a clear pathway to bachelor's degrees (which are required to become a Certified Public Accountant). The college could list this course sequence in its catalog and promote it through community partners working with immigrant women who often gain initial employment in the service or childcare industries.

Skills Builder On-ramps: While adults may initially enroll to address immediate economic imperatives, completing a skills builder course sequence can be the first step toward earning a certificate or degree. To facilitate this achievement, colleges can identify which skills builder course sequences are closely aligned with the requirements of related certificates or degrees. Colleges could then conduct outreach to skills

Understand your skills builders in the context of your region's labor market.

Understand who your skills builders are.

- What disciplines are skills builders enrolling in at your institution?
- How many courses are they taking?
- What are the demographics of your skills builders?
- How do enrollment and course-taking patterns vary by student characteristics?

Take stock of existing course sequences and pathways to earning certificates, credentials, and degrees at your college.

- Which current skills builder course sequences lead to meaningful economic returns?
- Which skills builder course sequences could be turned into micro-credentials?
- How could the college embed the courses in stackable credential and transfer pathways?

Gain clarity about labor market information to better prepare students for work.

- Consult with regional organizations that specialize in labor market information to identify programs and course sequences that are aligned with industry needs.
- Engage employers to identify skill sets needed for high-demand jobs.
- Partner with four-year institutions to understand how skills can be layered onto bachelor's degrees to better prepare students for work.

builders who have completed these courses about opportunities to continue their education in the certificate or degree program. In Colorado, over a third of skills builder course sequences were completely nested in existing certificate pathways. Skills builder course sequences that yield strong economic returns also may represent good opportunities for colleges to create new micro-credentials.

Illustrative Scenario: An analysis of skills builder courses in Automotive Engineering Technology shows that a two-course sequence can yield an average \$10,000 increase in earnings. Those two courses align with the college's Automotive Engineering Technology certificate, which has a total of six courses and nets earnings gains of about \$23,000 for graduates. The college could turn the two-course sequence into a micro-credential and promote this opportunity in the catalog. Furthermore, the advising office could reach out to skills builder students who completed these courses in the past to alert them that they could double their earnings gains if they finish the certificate. The college also provides skills builders with longer-term options, such as related associate degrees in Engineering Technology, Automotive Engineering Technology, and Construction Engineering Technology, and a bachelor's degree in Engineering.

Upskilling Opportunities: A significant number of skills builders already hold bachelor's degrees and are leveraging short-term course-taking to strengthen job-specific competencies. Community colleges can partner with local employers and nearby universities to map out relevant job skills and inform alumni about upskilling opportunities.

Illustrative Scenario: In response to a new biomanufacturing facility opening in the region, a community college could work with the employer to document biotechnology skills that could be taught through a short sequence of courses that would complement a bachelor's degree in Biology or Chemistry. The college could then partner with area universities to reach out to science graduates about the opportunity to pair their generalist degrees with specific job-related skills. The college could also work with the employer to secure paid internships and fill newly posted positions.

Develop skills builder offerings that are relevant to your region's labor market needs.

- Evaluate which local populations would benefit from upskilling opportunities.
- Partner with workforce-development entities, adult schools, and community organizations to identify strategies to direct women, people of color, and first-time college goers to higher-return pathways.
- Work with employers to advocate for stronger earnings in low-wage but essential occupations.

Create communications that inform students about skills builder opportunities and economic outcomes.

- Develop new marketing campaigns to attract skills builders to enroll for the first time and invite graduates to return for upskilling with specific information about the economic returns to course-taking and completion.
- Update websites to clearly articulate skills builder course-taking pathways and opportunities for career advancement.
- Modify Guided Pathways resources to show how skills builder course sequences fit into the metamajors and programs.
- Partner with workforce-development entities, adult schools, and community organizations to conduct outreach.
- Add skills builder information to the college's success dashboard to raise visibility internally and track progress on recruiting skills builders and converting them to completers.

Alignment with Perkins V and WIOA

Implementation of skills builder course sequences aligns with federal policy, including the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Perkins V focuses on educating and preparing youth and adults for the workforce with expanded opportunities for students to explore, choose, and pursue career and technical education programs of study and career pathways that yield high-value credentials. Skills builder course sequences provide an opportunity to engage adult students in reexamining their college and career goals.

WIOA is designed to strengthen public workforce systems so that more individuals, especially underserved youth and adults, gain employment in high-quality jobs through increased access to education, training, employment, and support services for success in the labor market while employers can hire from a pipeline of highly skilled workers. WIOA funds can be used to diversify participation in skills builder course sequences leading to greater economic returns.

Both Perkins V and WIOA share a key principle of promoting equal opportunity by eliminating barriers to education and employment for youth and adults—such as college systems that are designed for first-time, full-time students rather than working adults. These federal funding streams emphasize approaches that increase access to more high-quality career pathways (Perkins V) and improve transparency and access to information so that job seekers can make informed choices (WIOA).

Community colleges can redesign program sequences, expand outreach efforts, and implement support services to remove barriers to career advancement and economic mobility, especially for adults who live in poverty or work in jobs with unsustainable incomes. For example, colleges can use Perkins V and WIOA funding to develop pathways that integrate skills builder course sequences with stackable credentials; update websites to provide greater clarity about course sequences and career pathway options, including potential earnings; and leverage social services such as childcare and housing support that can help address the total cost of college.

Guided Pathways Implementation

Guided Pathways is a redesign framework focused on community colleges becoming more student-centered from enrollment to completion, with a focus on specific strategies to help students identify and efficiently reach their goals. Supporting practices include meeting students' academic and nonacademic needs, ensuring students engage in proactive and ongoing advising, and providing clear education and career pathways that lead students to sustainable careers.

Colleges can integrate skills builders into Guided Pathways by explicitly articulating the multiple on-ramps available to adult learners based on their education and career goals. For example, skills builder course sequences can be mapped to metamajors—clusters of programs that align with college and career pathways such as health, business, or STEM. For example, short course sequences in Construction Crafts can be integrated with STEM pathways to help students see the connections between machining courses and engineering master's degrees.

Skills builder course sequences also can be highlighted on program-level maps, documents that clarify the courses students must take to complete a program and the order in which they should take the courses. By documenting how skills builder courses fit into stackable credentials, more college practitioners can provide insights to students about their opportunities to earn valuable awards. Program maps also can show where skills builder course sequences fit in after students earn awards, particularly for those with bachelor's degrees.

Addressing Equity Gaps in Skills Builder Access and Outcomes

While some skills builders see economic gains from their course-taking sequences, not all do. In fact, most skills builders who have low incomes do not advance to family-sustaining wages through their course-taking. Furthermore, we found that students with no prior college experience, African Americans, and women are more likely to take skills builder course sequences with lower economic gains.

Establish intake, advising, and support structures that enable skills builders to enter, exit, and re-enter.

- Use onboarding surveys, electronic transcript services, and degree-audit software to map students' course-taking history against awards and transfer pathways.
- Learn about students' academic and career goals, understand their context, and identify the supports they need to stay enrolled.
- Identify skills gained through work experience that could be translated into credit for prior learning within a stackable credential pathway.
- Clearly articulate successive short-term and long-term milestones so that students can stay on target to return to college and complete programs over time.
- Offer evening, weekend, and online courses to provide skills builders with further flexibility.
- Partner with employers to integrate work-based learning, clinical placements, employer presentations, and onsite visits into skills builder courses to help students better understand expanded career options.

Contributing factors such as regional labor market needs, attainment of industry-valued certificates and credentials, and previous job experience influence the labor market value of specific courses for specific students. But skills builders don't always have this critical information, especially if they are the first in their family to attend college and must rely on friends or relatives for career advice. For example, skills builders may not know that different course sequences can yield markedly different economic returns—even within the same industry.

Illustrative Scenario: A skills builder completes a Scaffolds/High Elevation course, which nets more money in the student's pocket—an additional \$5,200. However, students who paired the same class with a Carpentry Safety course increased their earnings by \$12,400—enough to move from a low- to a middle-economic rung and thus support a family of four with the help of a second wage earner. Therefore, the college advising office could reach out and encourage the skills builder to add a Carpentry Safety course. They might also inform the skills builder that securing credit for prior learning for basic electrical skills and taking a set of advanced electrical courses would allow the student to complete an industry certification for solar installation, thus diversifying the student's job options.

In other cases, students may not see themselves as candidates for specific types of jobs. A practice of providing transparency during advising can help remove barriers. With more information, skills builders can make informed decisions, preventing wasted time, money, and mental investment on course-taking resulting in little or no economic return.

Illustrative Scenario: For example, a number of students may take Multimedia courses such as Web Design or Adobe Products, with the intention of getting a job as a designer. However, these students may not be aware that most designers earn low wages and work part time, often without medical and retirement benefits. Students could be informed that similar skills are needed to support computer-based simulations in the biotechnology industry. By helping students become aware of courses and programs that require similar skill sets but that lead to different career opportunities, colleges may encourage students to enter different fields of study.

Conclusion

Community colleges have multiple missions, which span taking individual courses for upskilling to preparing for transfer to a four-year institution. Too often, these different missions are approached in silos rather than addressing how individuals might leverage community college to address shifting priorities over the course of their lives. By examining ways to use skills builder course-taking as an avenue for understanding the relationship between school and work, colleges can provide students with more opportunities for growth and economic mobility—not only for adult learners but for all students seeking to balance their immediate economic imperatives with their longer-term goals and aspirations.

Descriptive Portraits of Skills Builders



DALE

Age: 33

Family Life: Married with two young children

Skills builder course-taking provides some economic gains, but better gains are found with longer course-taking sequences.

Background

- For 10 years after high school, Dale worked at an auto repair garage until the business closed.
- A long-time customer offered Dale an opportunity to learn a new trade at his small heating and air conditioning business.
- Dale completed two introductory Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) courses over two semesters at a community college to speed up his skills acquisition.
- The owner increased Dale's salary by \$3,000 at the start of his second year.
- Dale has continued to work at this small business for five years, gaining on-the-job experience and receiving a cost-of-living wage increase each year.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Integrated Systems Engineering Technology

Course-Taking: HVAC

Reason: Gain new skills while transitioning into a new trade

Outcome: Acquired skills for a new trade from completing two courses combined with on-the-job experience, but realized minimal financial gains

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Enroll full-time for two semesters to earn a Building Maintenance Technician certificate

Potential Economic Gains: Move from a low- to middle-income status

- With five years of work experience as an HVAC technician, Dale could take the exam to become a licensed HVAC Commercial Contractor so that he can work on commercial buildings, work independently, broaden his job options, and earn more money.
- Dale could also earn a Building Maintenance Technician certificate, enabling him to become a facility maintenance technician. He already has credit for two HVAC courses he can apply toward the certificate.
- Dale would improve his earning potential, benefiting himself and his family.



SUNITA

Age: 38

Family Life: Married and living in an intergenerational household of six people: her husband, two teenage children, and two aging parents

Skills builders benefit from knowing about the progress they have already made toward a certificate.

Background

- Sunita has worked at the headquarters of a major retail company for more than 20 years, first as an administrative assistant and now as an executive assistant to a small leadership team that greatly values her contributions to the company. A college degree has not been necessary for her advancement.
- Sunita had wanted to attend college, but her responsibilities of caring for her aging in-laws, raising two children, and working full time didn't afford her the time.
- In two years, Sunita and her husband will begin incurring college expenses for their children. Although nervous about attending community college herself, Sunita believes she must to earn more money.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Business

Course-Taking: Intermediate Excel

Reason: Gain confidence attending community college and advance her job-related skills

Outcome: Advanced her skills and knowledge of spreadsheets and gained self-confidence in her ability to complete a college-level course, but realized minimal financial gains through a bonus of \$5,000

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Complete four Business Technology courses that, along with her previous Excel course, will lead to an Administrative Specialist certificate

Potential Economic Gains: Additional earnings to a living-wage income

- With her newfound confidence, Sunita could complete other courses such as graphic design and business data systems to build her business technology skills.
- Additionally, she can appeal to receive credit for prior learning for her expertise in word processing and choose to continue taking the remaining four classes to earn an Administrative Specialist certificate. Sunita's solid work experience and certificate of proficiency would make her competitive for higher-paying positions in other industries.



HOLLY

Age: 28

Family Life: Single with one school-aged child

Skills builder course sequences often lead to economic gains but may not advance students from poverty to living wages.

Background

- Since completing her GED, Holly has worked in the retail, food, and health industries.
- Three years ago, Holly completed State Tested Nurse Assistant (STNA) training at a senior healthcare facility and was immediately hired. She enjoys helping seniors with their personal care at the facility.
- Holly needed to earn more money and wanted to work in a hospital setting. She completed a three-month Phlebotomy course and lab at a community college.
- Holly got a second job in a hospital as a phlebotomist and sees new patients each day. Although she likes her job and is applying her new skills, the job is not yielding higher earnings.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Health

Course-Taking: Phlebotomy

Reason: Work in a hospital setting and earn more money

Outcome: Satisfied with a new opportunity to work in a hospital, but has not realized economic returns aside from working additional hours

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Complete additional courses to earn a short-term technical certificate or a Multi-Skilled Healthcare certificate

Potential Economic Gains: Increase earnings by \$10,000 as a multi-skilled technician

- Holly can return to community college and build on her Phlebotomy course to attain a short-term technical certificate as a Clinical Medical Assistant or Patient Care Technician, which may increase her total earnings. Either certificate program takes two full-time semesters to complete.
- Alternatively, Holly can consider working toward a Multi-Skilled Healthcare certificate, which takes three semesters to complete. Her previous Phlebotomy course and lab will count toward this certificate, which has greater earning potential than the short-term technical certificates and potential for advancement and higher income.



EDWINA

Age: 41

Family Life: Single

African American and female skills builders experience the lowest rates of economic gains and would benefit from prioritized advising about course-taking that is more likely to yield higher returns.

Background

- Edwina began her career in accounting as a teenager when her aunt taught her how to balance accounting books. As a young adult, she volunteered as the bookkeeper for her church, which she enjoyed more than her responsibilities working as a salesperson at a big-box clothing store.
- To start her own small business, Edwina took a Bookkeeping course at an adult school. Within a few years, she was the bookkeeper for six small businesses in her community.
- Ready to expand her bookkeeping business, Edwina completed two courses in accounting software—Excel and QuickBooks—at a community college.
- As a result, Edwina became much more efficient in her work with her current clients, but the additional skills did not improve her marketability to new clients or increase her earnings.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Business

Course-Taking: Excel and QuickBooks

Reason: Update her computer skills, improve her qualifications, and increase her earnings

Outcome: Able to work more efficiently, but has not garnered new clients nor seen any economic gains

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Build on course credits previously earned by completing an additional two semesters of coursework, followed by passing the national certification exam and earning her Bookkeeping certificate. In doing so, she would be completing courses that count toward an associate degree in accounting and eventually toward a bachelor's degree that would qualify her for a Certified Public Accountant exam.

Potential Economic Gains: Additional earnings to attain a living-wage income

- A Bookkeeping certificate offered by the American Institute of Professional Bookkeepers will increase her professional confidence and demonstrate her competencies, enabling Edwina to attract more clients and charge more for her services.
- Edwina may receive credit for her previous accounting classes and may be able to appeal for credit for prior learning for some courses based on her work experience.



ENRICO

Age: 36

Family Life: Married with two children

Economic opportunities vary within the same discipline.

Background

- Since the age of 20, Enrico has been working for a home renovation business where he has honed his carpentry skills.
- After five years, Enrico expanded his skills by first completing an introductory Electrical Wiring course at a community college, and a few years later, a Plumbing course. His boss valued the new skills and rewarded him with a \$1,500 salary increase each time he completed a course.
- Over the years, Enrico has not seen any economic gains, despite his additional skills. He now has 13 years of construction experience and has strong communication skills in Spanish and English.
- With a family to support, Enrico is considering how he can increase his earnings by a minimum of \$12,000 annually to earn a middle income.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Engineering, Business, and Information Technologies

Course-Taking: Electrical Wiring and Plumbing

Reason: Expand his skills, job opportunities, and earnings

Outcome: Learned valuable and new skills, but did not see sizable financial gains

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Complete three Welding courses and earn a technical certificate which would also count toward an associate degree in Welding Technology

Potential Economic Gains: Increase earnings by \$20,000

- Enrico might consider adding another trade—welding, which is a high-demand occupation in his region. By completing a core of basic welding classes, Enrico will be further skilled in multiple trades and can increase his income level from low to middle.
- His completed courses would put him on track to earn a short-term technical certificate in Basic Welding or an associate of applied science degree in Welding Technology, which would take two years to complete. Combined with his previous work experience, Enrico would be positioning himself for higher-paying job opportunities.



JERRY

Age: 52

Family Life: Married with three children

By linking skills builder course sequences to degrees, students can move up the economic ladder.

Background

- Jerry has worked at a small, rural K-12 school district for more than 25 years as a technology specialist. When he started, he played a critical role in installing technology in classrooms and administrative offices.
- Today, Jerry remains the sole technology specialist, supporting the district staff and teachers with their technology needs.
- Jerry's postsecondary education was a Computer Networking course he took 10 years ago at a community college. Otherwise, he is self-taught, largely from the internet. He is interested in cybersecurity.
- Jerry earns a middle income. The district's advancement policy has yielded a new job title of Director of Technology and a \$7,000 earnings increase, but Jerry would like more opportunities for career advancement.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Engineering, Business, and Information Technologies

Course-Taking: Computer Networking

Reason: Expand his skills for his school district technology job

Outcome: Learned new skills and received more money in his pocket

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Complete a one-semester program to earn a short-term Cybersecurity certificate, which will count toward an associate degree in Cybersecurity and Network Administration, as part of a stackable certificate sequence

Potential Economic Gains: Increase earnings by \$16,000

- Jerry can take one of five online cybersecurity classes, including Security+, Linux+, or Penetration Testing, plus take an industry certification exam for each.
- If he were to complete all five stackable certificate courses, he would earn an associate degree in Cybersecurity and Network Administration and have job opportunities outside of the school district with significant upward economic mobility.



CAMERON

Age: 24

Family Life: Single

Inform completers about education opportunities for upskilling to support their career advancement.

Background

- Growing up, Cameron always knew that he wanted to be a peace officer who was a role model to youth, working with the community, and keeping people safe.
- After working for five years as an assistant football coach at his former high school, Cameron attended a one-semester Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST)-certified law enforcement training academy.
- Immediately after, he passed the state certification exam and was hired as a peace officer in his hometown. Cameron's annual income rose by \$14,000 in his new job.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Public Services and Safety

Course-Taking: POST Basic Academic Training Academy

Reason for Building Skills: Become a peace officer

Outcome: Trained to pass the state certification exam for a new career and moved from low- to middle-income status

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Earn an associate degree in law enforcement technology

Potential Economic Gains: A college degree combined with experience improves the potential for promotions

- If Cameron were to return to community college and earn an associate degree in law enforcement technology, he won't see immediate financial gains. However, as he gains more on-the-job experience, a college degree will position him for promotions.



WAYNE

Age: 22

Family Life: Single

Identify pathways that yield significant gains, as well as those pathways that do not.

Background

- Two years ago, Wayne was hired as an entry-level machinist for a tool-making company. He aspired to learn more and move up the career ladder just as he had seen others in his community do. With no other responsibilities, Wayne was willing to work all shifts.
- Wayne's company supports education and training, which enabled him to complete two entry-level Machining courses at a community college during his first year on the job.
- Wayne demonstrated that he is committed to working hard, learning new skills, and advancing his career. This initiative caught the eye of his supervisor, who gave Wayne a small raise and offered to mentor him.

Skills Builder Course Experience

Area of Study: Manufacturing Engineering

Course-Taking: Computer Aided Drafting and SolidWorks

Reason for Building Skills: Gain new skills and move into a higher-paying job at his company

Outcome: Demonstration of Wayne's commitment to work and learning yielded some financial gains

A Better Skills Builder Option for Improved Outcomes

Course-Taking Guidance: Complete a two-year pathway to earn an associate degree to become a semiconductor technician

Potential Economic Gains: Employment at a company with more opportunities for advancement with an earnings increase of \$24,000

- While tool-making companies are facing pressure to offshore workers, which had previously meant that there were few machining positions in Wayne's community, a large technology company is building two state-of-the-art manufacturing plants and is seeking a pipeline of qualified workers through new training programs taught at community colleges. With an associate degree, Wayne can get a job as a semiconductor technician with the potential to increase his low-income status to a high-income status in just over a few years.
- Wayne could utilize community college advisors to learn about new education and career opportunities. Additionally, he could investigate which colleges will give him credit for prior learning and his two Machining courses.

Endnotes

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