

An Inventory of Community College Short Term Contract Training Programs in the US

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Abstract

Community colleges play an important role in assisting local business and industry by providing a variety of training programs for employees, including short-term programs. These contract training programs often receive public subsidies as an economic development incentive, and despite their popularity, relatively little is known about their structure, frequency of offerings, and challenges that face them. The purpose for conducting the current study was to profile and inventory these community college contract training offices. A survey was administered to a sample of 250 contract training administrators. Findings include a description of who these administrators report to, the experiences that prepared them for their positions, the typical number of programs they offer each year, how they recruit business participation, and the challenges they report facing the most frequently. These findings are important to policy makers, administrators, and scholars as they create a baseline understanding of how these programs are embedded in and represent their colleges.

Keywords: contract training, workforce development, noncredit instruction, community college organization

1. Introduction

One of the central functions of a community college is the provision of workforce development for its local service area. These workforce development programs can include both pre- and in-service types of programs that either provide initial training for a potential employee ranging to programs that teach current employees some different or new skill (O'Banion, 2019). These programs also range from those that are paid by the student with tuition dollars to programs, those that are subsidized by state or federal entities in an effort to grow the economic capacity of a region, and those that are sponsored by a current or potential employer (Miller & Grover, 2021).

Programs that receive less attention but are critically important are the short-term training programs provided by community colleges for their local business and industry (Beer, Brown, & Juskiewica, 2021). These programs might be focused on learning a specific skill, such as how to use a new piece of equipment, ranging to learning soft skills that might improve the industry's performance. Programs on international standards such as ISO training, English language instruction, and even adult basic education and literacy instruction can fall into the category of 'short term contract training.'

Short term training programs are primarily designed to be delivered to a specific business or corporation, typically delivering instruction on-site and making use of the business' infrastructure for training. These programs can be developed by the business conducting a needs assessment and determining that some instruction would benefit the company, or alternately, the business contacts the community college to conduct an analysis of needs (Leigh & Gill, 2009).

Many short term training programs are organized around the materials used for implementing the work of the business, such as the equipment used in manufacturing (GAO, 2008; Sanchez, 2019). The business, in adopting new equipment for example, would contact an appropriate individual at the community college to develop a curriculum about how to teach employees to use this new equipment. Similar scenarios include teaching employees how to repair equipment, how to teach employees to use equipment, etc.

Although community colleges have been actively engaged in short term, contract training for over 50 years, there is relatively little known about how these programs are administered and organized within colleges (Leigh & Gill, 2009; Xu & Ran, 2015). Therefore, the purpose for conducting the current study was to profile and inventory these contract training offices, their leaders and activities.

2. Background of the Study

Drury (2003) provided a brief introduction to the development of the contemporary community college, and particularly highlighted the early emphasis on vocational training in the 1920s and 1930s. Drawing on the work of Brint and Karabel (1989), he particularly noted that vocational instruction emerged as both a terminal degree to be earned by community college students, but also began as an economic driver to help industry. This now 100 year old practice illustrates that community colleges from their very early origins viewed an important role in helping business and industry train needed employees.

Jacobs and Worth (2019) described the evolution of workforce training in community colleges and particularly noted the engagement of public policy makers in the use of community colleges to provide job training outside of the classroom. Highlighting public legislation such as the Perkins Act, they observed that community colleges became much more of an economic development provider for area business and industry, noting the influence of internationalization, computerization, and the growth of technology as drivers for workforce retraining. In many instances, these training packages were funded both by private industry as well as public funds, rationalizing the public investment in business

development as a strategy for the public good.

Jacobs and Worth also mentioned the importance of short-term training programs because of their direct relationship with specific jobs, and that more community colleges will make use of training in areas such as apprenticeships and workforce networks among colleges to leverage efficiencies and prepare individuals for the workplace.

Leigh and Gill (2009) referred to the literature about responding to local workforce needs as “fragmented” (p. 95) and categorized this literature into three categories: national studies about employee earnings, individual site-based reports, and specific community college contract training reports. This last category was the focus of their study, and they concluded that the extensive nature of vocational training for credit was not a good predictor of local industry responsiveness, but, high levels of local financial support were positively tied to industry responsiveness. They noted “leadership can make a difference” (p. 101).

Leadership was also a key issue identified by Grover and Miller (2018) who explored the challenges facing community college job training. Data were collected from expert community college job training leaders, and they identified issues including reduced state funding for job training, an ability to find and keep faculty, and student preparedness as major challenges. They concluded that the availability of state funds to subsidize programs, including short-term contract training, were critical for these colleges to be effective in meeting their local industry needs.

The overarching philosophy of short-term contract training programs is that public funds are made available to business and industry through community colleges for the express purpose of providing mostly on-site training. Training objectives might be prioritized by the business itself, or it might contract with a community college to conduct needs analyses about how to respond to some possible issue or problem. In most cases the community college leaders apply for state funding or are allocated funds on a regular basis to offer these types of services, and colleges typically are able to retain some portion of funds for the indirect costs of program management (Dennis, 2017).

Additionally, it is not anticipated that all expertise needed for contract training is necessarily on the college’s faculty, and in many instances the college will hire trainers or experts to conduct the training in the behalf of the college. The result is that colleges provide a key service to the business and industry in their service areas and are provided the funding to offer this assessment and training.

Although community colleges have delivered applied job training and retraining programs for nearly 100 years (Drury, 2003) and the Vocational Education Act of 1963 (later renamed the Carl Perkins Act of 1984) has provided funding to community colleges through states for almost 60 years, little has been described about how these colleges structure and coordinate their efforts. This lack of understanding can result in duplication, an inability to compare structures to identify efficiency, and prohibits state offices from finding best practices about how community colleges help industry remain current and competitive.

3. Research Methods

To describe how community colleges are responding to local business and industry needs through short-term, contract training programs, a 7-item survey was developed by the researcher to gather descriptive data. The items for the survey were taken from writings about short-term training programs and community college administration and management broadly. The instrument was developed in fall 2021 and pilot tested with professionals not involved in the study. The survey was developed and administered in spring 2022 using an online survey software program.

Subjects included in the study were those community college professionals working in contract training. To develop a random sample of 250, community colleges who were members of a national membership-driven association were considered and identified using with random number generator. These colleges were then identified online and studied to identify the professional with oversight for contract training. Sample titles of these individuals included: director of contract training, vice president for workforce development, manager of business training services, coordinator of industry training, and dean of business and industry relations. As a note, of the 250 colleges identified, 9 did not provide either a name or email address for the individual responsible for these training programs, resulting in a total sample of 241 email addresses of professionals to be included in the study.

4. Findings

Using four reminder email requests for participation at three-day intervals, a total of 106 surveys were completed and deemed usable in the data analysis. This 44% response rate was considered acceptable for an online survey, and due to the descriptive nature of the study, was determined appropriate to help create initial baseline data for understanding short-term contract training programs.

As shown in Table 1, nearly half ($n=47$; 44%) of the respondents held a “director” title and over three-fourths reported to either a “president” ($n=33$; 31%) or vice president ($n=53$; 50%). To professionally prepare for their roles, a third had worked in private sector business and industry ($n=35$; 33%), a quarter worked in training ($n=27$; 25%), and 13% ($n=14$) had received formal coursework or training on how to prepare for their position. A small number of respondents ($n=7$; 6%) reported having earned their Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) certification.

Table 1. Who coordinates contract training

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Job Titles		
Vice President	19	18
Dean	21	20
Director	47	44
Coordinator	18	17
Assistant	1	>1

Reporting to		
President	33	31
Vice President	53	50
Dean	17	16
Other	3	2
Preparation for position		
Worked in training	27	25
Worked in Business and industry/private sector	35	33
Faculty	9	8
Other administration	19	18
Formal coursework/training	14	13
Certification (such as SHRM)	7	6
Other	0	0

In terms of programs offered, over half of the responding colleges delivered 11-20 training programs per year ($n=61$; 57%) and over a third delivered more than 20 per year ($n=37$; 35%), with the majority of these programs delivered to repeating businesses. Program directors indicated that they used a wide variety of strategies to recruit businesses to partner with them for training, including word of mouth marketing ($n=73$; 78%) community networking ($n=70$; 66%), and by being involved in community organizations ($n=59$; 56%).

Table 2. Recruitment practices of contract training

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Typical number of training programs in a year		
Under 10	8	7
11-20	61	57
More than 20	37	35
Number of repeating businesses		
Under 10	8	7
11-20	81	76
More than 20	17	16
Recruitment practices		
Social media	22	21
Local media	33	31
Word of mouth	78	73
Personal recruitment	61	57
Community networking	70	66
Community organizations	59	56

In the last section of the survey, responding contract training coordinators were asked about

the issues that they are facing, specifically indicating their level of agreement with each of the issues presented on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale with 1=Strongly Disagree that the issue is one that is being dealt with progressing to 5=Strongly Agree that they are dealing with that issue. As shown in Table 3, the most agreed upon issues were the pace of change in business and industry (\bar{x} =4.67), conducting training needs assessments (\bar{x} =4.32), and the availability of state funding (\bar{x} =4.28). They agreed least that the cost of program (\bar{x} =3.65) offerings was an issue that they are dealing with.

Table 3. Issues relating to short-term contract training

Characteristic	\bar{x}	R	SD
Pace of B&I change	4.67	3	.7102
Conducting B&I needs assessments	4.32	3	.9267
Availability of state funding	4.28	5	.8888
Availability of 'other' funding	4.03	4	1.276
Finding highly qualified trainers	4.01	4	1.100
Is a priority for the college	4.00	5	.9873
Technology related issues	3.90	5	1.000
Recruiting B&I for programs	3.88	5	.8025
Competition with other training providers	3.76	5	.9908
Cost of program offerings	3.65	4	.8117

5. Discussion

The findings presented in the study are important to practitioners as well as scholars for several reasons. First, those offering contract training programs were identified as reporting to senior college leaders, meaning that those individuals have to be informed, educated, and trained about the unique aspects of short-term training programs. These leaders must find value in this type of work and must be willing to confirm that these programs are a priority for the institution. Through placing value on them, the critical resources for their success can be assured and the visibility for serving local business and industry can be clearly demonstrated to external constituents.

Secondly, these findings suggest that many of those working in coordinating or overseeing short-term contract training rely mostly on previous experience working in business and industry to learn how to do their jobs. There is no indication in this study as to whether or not that type of training is adequate or fully meets the needs of these professionals, and further study might focus on assessing training levels of these administrators and what types of training experiences would best meet their needs. For leaders in community colleges, this discussion might focus on creating internal programs within districts or in partnership with local professional associations, or, it might be important for national associations to explore training conferences, institutes, and programs that can provide training.

Third, study findings indicated that informal marketing strategies were commonly used to identify short term training needs. Questions about the efficiency, equity, and sustainability of these types of marketing approaches can and should be studied. Additionally, such practices

allude to a relationship-based reliance between college and business and industry leaders. These relationships can be difficult to navigate, especially during times of administrator transition. Research into best practices, including case studies, might help develop a reliable series of approaches to relationship development and marketing approaches.

And fourth, the most agreed upon issue facing short-term training programs was the pace of change in business and industry, perhaps alluding to a fast pace of change driven by issues such as improved technological efficiency, environment-driven and sustainability issues, and even changing workforce qualifications. These kinds of issues need further study, and opportunities for contract training professionals to meet, discuss, and compare challenges and response strategies should be provided and encouraged.

Overall, findings begin an important discussion about the current practice of community college short-term training and future research and exploration into these types of programs is certainly warranted. By better documenting what is happening in this field, and providing opportunities to explain how it has evolved to this point and what the future might look like, policy makers as well as administrators will be better situated to meet their local business and industry training needs.

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