



# Career and Technical Education's Role in Worker Retraining: Addressing the Skills Gap

# ISSUE SHOOT

APRIL 2011



**T**he current economic situation and growing jobs-skills mismatch have dramatically increased the importance of programs and opportunities to retrain workers for the demands of the current workplace.

Unemployment rates remain high as a result of U.S. economic conditions, exacerbated by the loss of jobs to globalization and increased use of technology to produce goods and deliver services. Individuals who lose their jobs are having a much harder time finding new work than in the past, and there are many workers who are forced to work only part time or who are employed in positions paying low wages with no opportunity for advancement, resulting in lost hours of work, decreases in wages and reduced weekly earnings.

Under these circumstances, it may seem logical to assume that there are no good jobs available. On the contrary, there are still many employment opportunities in the job market for workers with the right skill set. The current long-term unemployment trend stems from a widespread mismatch between displaced workers' skills and the current needs of employers. There is also a mismatch between the skills of many individuals in low-wage jobs and the skills required for these new employment opportunities, making it difficult for underemployed workers to advance.

The unemployed and those looking to advance from low-wage positions—even those who previously completed some form of postsecondary training—need the opportunity to gain skills as well as credentials to make themselves marketable to employers who currently have jobs available.

## CTE Provides a Solution

The CTE system has played a large role in the development of new, targeted training programs that have become increasingly vital to those in need of updated skills. CTE programs offer workers in a wide variety of different situations the opportunity to update current skills, develop new skills and knowledge, and obtain the necessary certificate or degree for desired employment.

CTE educators are leading efforts to ensure that new and redesigned programs are relevant and accessible to those most in need of additional education and training. These programs target the adult learner through short-term and accelerated programs to decrease the time required for completion, utilize flexible learning approaches to account for students' other responsibilities, concentrate education and skills training in high-demand career areas to ensure students are prepared for jobs that exist in local economies, and include wrap-around support services to increase student success.

## Offering Short-term and Accelerated Programs

One of the biggest advances in CTE worker retraining programs has been the development of short-term and accelerated programs designed to get individuals back in the workforce quickly. These programs provide an opportunity for individuals to upgrade and develop skills in a rigorous educational environment at a faster pace.



Such options are appealing to individuals without the time or money available to invest in full-time, traditional postsecondary programs, which often take up to two years to complete.

Many of these short-term opportunities result in certificates, diplomas or associate degrees, increasing the marketability of those workers involved. Workers also have the option of taking non-credit continuing education classes, which do not result in a certificate or degree but do update the employees' skills and knowledge within a certain field, helping to ensure job security, opportunities for advancement or qualification for new positions.

## Utilizing Flexible Learning Approaches

Underemployed workers or workers looking to update or learn new skills often struggle to fulfill the time requirements of school due to other responsibilities and commitments. In addition to packaging programs in an accelerated format, many other flexible programs have been developed, including evening or online courses and other alternative schedules. For example, at Madisonville Community College in Kentucky, students' individual needs are assessed and then customized training is offered to fit both the needs and the schedule of the student. Training sessions are offered in the evening and on weekends, and basic self-paced learning programs are accessible online.

## Offering Specific Support Services

The population of unemployed and underemployed workers often needs additional support to complete training programs. CTE leaders have incorporated wrap-around support services, often targeted at particular subgroups of these populations, into their programs to meet specific needs. For example, these services and programs might provide additional support to those who speak English as a second language, displaced homemakers, aging dislocated workers or underemployed full-time workers. These training programs are tailored to the specific background and individual needs of the learners.

For example, the ESL Vocational Career Pathway offered at Portland Community College provides non-English speaking students with the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge for a specific profession while also learning to master the English language. English language learners who are unemployed or are underemployed can take advantage of programs such as ESL Healthcare, ESL Food Service Program and ESL Office Skills.

## Focusing on High-demand Careers

In order to ensure that displaced workers and others in need of retraining can actually use the skills they gain through education programs, CTE programs have focused efforts on high-demand careers in their local areas. By identifying the high-need areas within a state or region, CTE programs can better meet the needs of those individuals enrolling in training programs, and, at the same time, specifically address local economic issues.

## Policy Action Needed

The U.S. economy depends on an appropriately skilled workforce. As significant employment opportunities are phased out and new positions developed, members of the workforce must update their skills to remain relevant. Specifically, policymakers should focus on the following activities to increase the availability of high-quality CTE worker retraining programs:

- Ensure adequate funding is available for programs, such as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, that build the capacity of educational institutions to develop and offer worker retraining programs.
- Expand the provision in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that allowed local workforce investment boards (WIBs) to contract directly with providers to facilitate the training of multiple individuals in high-demand occupations.
- Strengthen connections between education and workforce development systems to ensure more individuals have access to appropriate education and skills training. Efforts are needed to:
  - Increase the use of common measures and data sharing.
  - Strengthen the role of CTE on state and local workforce boards.
  - Incorporate sector strategies.
  - Enhance linkages between adult education and job training programs.
- Ensure that other federal programs providing support to unemployed students do not penalize individuals for engaging in retraining programs. For example, increase the time allowed for education and training programs under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program from 12 months to 24 months.