



EDUCATION &amp; WORKFORCE

## Rural community colleges adding workforce training programs to drive employment for local residents

 Graham Bosch  1 day ago  6 min read  Add comment

Reliable job opportunities offering livable wages can be few and far between in rural Arizona, but community colleges in rural counties are making a difference through direct-to-work occupational training and re-careering programs, according to community college leaders from Coconino and Gila counties.

“Having a community college in our rural communities, or at least close enough to be able to access the community college, is imperative for the future of Arizona,” said Dr. Colleen Smith, president of Coconino Community College (CCC). “The work that we do in various kinds of training, whether it’s short certificate training or full associate degrees, and the work we do with local businesses and listening to them about what their needs are in training, makes a huge difference.”

Coconino County is the largest county in Arizona and the second-largest in the U.S. with a [population of only 140,000](#).

“Serving this large rural area is quite a monumental task,” Smith said at a rural development forum in Wickenburg in August. “Every community is very different. They have different kinds of business and industry, so the community college working directly with the community and the employers is important for economic development in the communities.”



CCC has a plan to get its students working: the [CCC2WORK program](#), an “affordable pathway” to skilled jobs in science, nursing and emergency services. Health care services are especially in need in Coconino County, Smith said, but CCC nursing students do very well.

“One hundred percent of our graduates in nursing are employed, and 80 percent stay in Coconino County,” Smith said about the CCC Registered Nurse (RN) associate degree program. “They take the same national boards that students who graduate with an RN with a bachelor’s degree take.”

Aside from the nursing program, 90 percent of firefighters, EMTs and paramedics in Coconino County received some type of training — either original certification or continued education — from CCC, Smith said.

“We would not be able to do either one of these programs without partnering with people,” Smith said. “We would just not have the resources.”

CCC partners with hospitals in the county to provide clinical job opportunities for nursing students, and the majority of the school’s fire science instructors also work in the region and understand its needs.

Directly south of Coconino County is Gila County, where Gila Community College (GCC) has 19 workforce training programs intended to bring more employment opportunities to residents of underserved areas in the region. Community colleges often do not receive the funding they need to enhance or expand their educational programs, said Michael Pastor, workforce training director for GCC, who spoke at the rural development forum in Wickenburg.

“We do receive workforce development funding, which is really beneficial to a community college like ours,” Pastor said.

GCC partners with local hospitals, fire departments and contracting businesses to connect students with on-the-job training opportunities. GCC, which has campuses in Globe and Payson, is a provisional community college district partnered with Eastern Arizona College, an accredited institution, to offer students college credits that can transfer to state universities and other Arizona community colleges.

“In the Payson area, we have a small nursing program, we have a cosmetology program, and we’re getting ready to start our first workforce development industrial program,” Pastor said. The first industrial program offers HVAC technician training and is expected to begin later this month.

Demand for capable HVAC technicians is predicted to grow by 21 percent from 2016 to 2026, [according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Need for technicians is especially expected to



[GCC](#) partnered with the [Arizona Department of Transportation \(ADOT\)](#) and the Federal Highway Administration to create the [ADOT Construction Academy](#), which offers training in carpentry, masonry and construction math. The tuition-free program prepares individuals in rural communities for steady employment in highway construction and other types of contracting work. Students of the program also receive support services including transportation assistance, job readiness skills development, child care assistance and safe attire for job sites.

“It’s to teach entry-level students, employees, adult learners, basic carpentry skills so they can go into a lot of these positions with contractors,” Pastor said, adding that contractors have previously expressed a need for more reliable workers. “They have trouble finding people to work for them,” he said.

The program, located at GCC’s Regional Training Center in Miami, Arizona, partners with nearby cities and towns to complete local construction projects. GCC is also partnered with the Yavapai-Apache Nation in a construction program at the Camp Verde Indian Reservation.

The tribal program is aimed at Native Americans who are unemployed and seeking steady jobs. Students finish the 16-week program with six college credits, basic carpentry skills and the training necessary to join the tribal maintenance staff, Pastor said.

“We have 12 Native Americans in that program,” Pastor said. “They’re building a 20 by 30 (foot) water sample lab for their water department up there.”

In the most recent development for the ADOT Construction Academy, Corey Foster, ADOT’s workforce development program manager, began reaching out to the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, White Mountain Apache Tribe and Yavapai-Apache Nation, among others, to get more Native American communities involved in construction training.

“Mr. Foster wants us to take this program to the other 22 nations in the state, so we’re kind of excited about that,” Pastor said. “We think it’s going to be a good opportunity for us.”

Both Pastor and Smith agreed that cross-organizational partnerships are the key to success. CCC partners with Coconino County, city governments, public schools and a myriad of other organizations in the area.

“I think the future of all these kinds of programs deals with staying up on what’s current and what’s needed in your area,” Smith said. “It’s partnering together, and it’s working to be innovative with the way we offer things so that we can meet the training needs but not have more than what is currently needed.”



## Graham Bosch

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