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Helping Communities Prepare Workers

Like a lot of small communities in the United States, [Elizabethtown, Ky.](#), has struggled mightily to find a viable economic future. The city of just under 100,000 people has lost more than 4,000 manufacturing jobs since 2000, and with just 8 percent of its adult residents holding bachelor's degrees — and nearly 4 in 10 working adults scoring low on literacy tests — the prospects for replacing those positions with jobs in the knowledge economy would seem slim.

But since 2003, Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, in conjunction with the local Workforce Investment Board, have developed a program aimed at identifying industries with a documented need for workers and then collaborating with employers to educate and train (or re-train) workers to fill those jobs, using a mix of federal, state and other funds.

The partnership has so far created one effort, the NorthStar Health Careers, that has begun producing respiratory therapists with associate degrees. Each partnership has chipped in: Jefferson Community and Technical College, in Louisville, provided faculty emmbers; a local hospital equipped a teaching lab and agreed to cover tuition and fees for employees who entered the program; the local workforce board paid for marketing, and Elizabethtown's two-year college used its interactive mobile television unit to broadcast the faculty lectures from Louisville. A second program, in the transportation industry, is now getting off the ground, with \$950,000 raised so far from state and federal sources.

The Elizabethtown program is featured in a report issued today about an approach to worker training and career education, called “career pathways,” that is emerging in various states. [The report](#) by the Workforce Strategy Center, a nonprofit advocacy group, describes a situation in which many states and localities are struggling to produce a “robust knowledge workforce because of declining public resources and an education pipeline that often “functions more like a sieve than a pipeline,” leaving out many citizens from lower income levels.

The “career pathways” approach, which has been embraced in states such as Arkansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oregon and Washington, and regions such as Madison, Wisc., New York, San Diego and St. Louis, is designed to get a wide range of relevant parties in an area — educators from primary through postsecondary

schools, employers, state work force officials and others — working together to train both young people and adults for high-demand jobs in emerging fields important to the local economy.

“A career pathway is a series of connected education and training programs and support services that enable individuals to secure employment within a specific industry..., and to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in that sector,” the report says. Each step on the path, it adds, “is designed explicitly to prepare the participant for the next level of employment and education.”

Exactly how a community would develop such a program differs from place to place; the model, the report says, “cannot be purchased off the shelf.”

But certain key elements are usually in place: “extensive reliance on data; “road maps” that show the connections between education and training programs and jobs at different levels of an employment sector; easy transfer of credits across and among institutions; curriculums defined in terms of skills needed for jobs; programs offered at convenient times and places for working adults; and “wrap-around” support services, such as child care, career counseling and career placement.

Community colleges, like the one in Elizabethtown, are at the core of such efforts, the report says, because they are inexpensive, geared toward providing education and training for underprepared students, and closely tied and attuned to their regions.

But even with those advantages, two-year institutions that have experimented with the career pathways approach have faced difficulties — internal and external, the report notes. One challenge is getting faculty members from more traditional academic programs to participate in the workforce-related effort; others are getting employers to cover tuition benefits for their workers who return for training, and tracking the academic and other progress of students as they move between the working world and postsecondary education — difficult to do without data systems that track people individually.

— [Doug Lederman](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/08/31/career>.

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