



Strategies Employed by Ohio Community Colleges to Improve Labor Market Outcomes for Older Students

Oksana Dikhtyar, Phyllis Ann Cummins, Kathryn McGrew & Peter Riley Bahr

To cite this article: Oksana Dikhtyar, Phyllis Ann Cummins, Kathryn McGrew & Peter Riley Bahr (2020): Strategies Employed by Ohio Community Colleges to Improve Labor Market Outcomes for Older Students, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, DOI: [10.1080/10668926.2020.1738289](https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1738289)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1738289>



Published online: 19 Mar 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 10





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Strategies Employed by Ohio Community Colleges to Improve Labor Market Outcomes for Older Students

Oksana Dikhtyar ^a, Phyllis Ann Cummins^b, Kathryn McGrew^b, and Peter Riley Bahr ^c

^aDepartment of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA; ^bScripps Gerontology Center, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA; ^cCenter for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

ABSTRACT

To remain competitive in the labor market, many middle-aged and older adults need to upgrade existing or learn new skills through occupational training and education. Furthermore, as compared with the past, employers now are more willing to hire older workers after completing a credential due to a low unemployment rate. Moreover, employers often collaborate with community colleges to provide workforce training for their employees. Community colleges are the preferred choice for older students due to affordability, open-access admission, a greater number of credential options including short-term credentials, and convenient locations. However, little is known about challenges and opportunities for improving labor market outcomes at community colleges for adults ages 40 and older. Based on thematic analysis of student and faculty focus groups and individual interviews with staff and administrators at 23 Ohio community colleges, this paper identifies strategies community colleges employ to improve labor market outcomes for middle-aged and older adults (age 40 and older) and to meet the needs of employers. Additionally, challenges faced by older community college students during training, retraining, and finding employment are discussed.

Background

In 2016 adults ages 40–64 comprised nearly half of all workers in the U.S. and this number is projected to continue to increase (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2019a). Labor force participation at older ages has been increasing for several decades resulting in a higher average age of retirement (Lacey, Toossi, Dubina, & Gensler, 2017; Munnell, 2015). For example, among females ages 55–64, labor force participation increased from 51% in 1998 to 59% in 2018 and is projected to increase to 64% in 2028. Among males, the 65–74 age group has experienced the largest increase in labor force participation, rising from 23% in 1998 to 32% in 2018 and is projected to reach 37% in 2028 (BLS, 2019b) (see Figures 1 and 2).

Some of the reasons for this trend are improvements in health and longevity, outsourcing more physically demanding jobs overseas, moving from defined benefit to defined contribution pension plans, and changes to Social Security (Coile, 2018). To stay competitive in the labor market in the era of rapid technological advancements and globalization, middle-aged and older adults need to either upgrade their existing skills or learn new ones through occupational training and continuing education. However, some employers may be reluctant to fund skill upgrades for older workers due to a shorter payback period and lost productivity during training (Hsu, 2013; Johnson, 2007; Schulz, 2000), resulting in older workers either not upgrading their skills or having to seek another

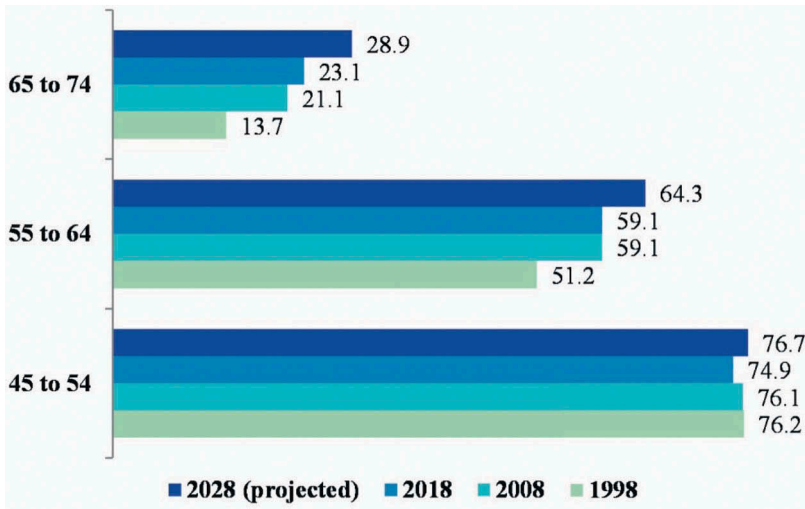


Figure 1. Labor force participation by age group (women). Data source: BLS (2019b).

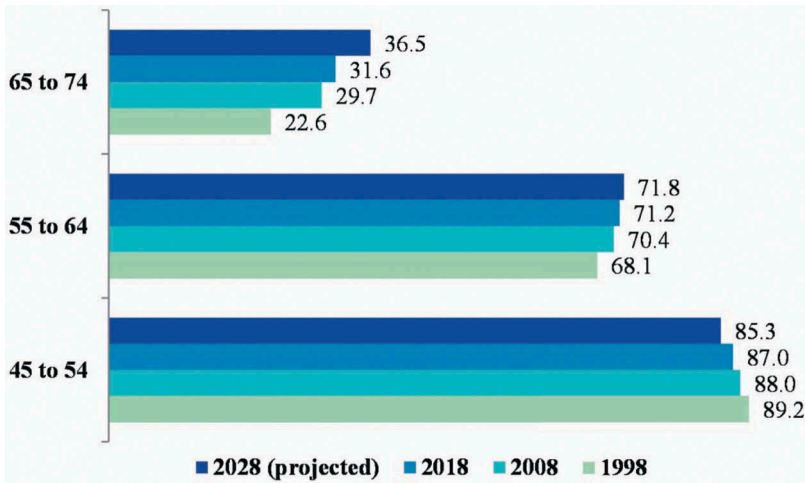


Figure 2. Labor force participation by age group (men). Data source: BLS (2019b).

funding source for their education. Community colleges are not only important sources of training and education for older adults, they also work closely with employers to meet their workforce needs (The Council of Economic Advisors, 2018).

Older adults are more likely to attend community colleges as compared to a baccalaureate institution due to affordability, open-access admission policies, a greater number of credential options including short-term credentials, and convenient geographic location (Hickman & Olney, 2011). Among students ages 40 and older enrolled at all public institutions in 2017, 64% were enrolled at a two-year college. Among students ages 25 and older enrolled at two-year public institutions in 2017, students ages 40 and older comprised 27% of enrollment, while the proportion at four-year public institutions was 21% (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Although community colleges are increasingly being seen as a means to improve labor market outcomes for their students, little research has been conducted to identify challenges and opportunities for improving labor market outcomes at community colleges for adults ages 40 and older.

Researchers largely have neglected the potentially unique educational experiences and pathways of older community college students. Furthermore, the limited research on older learners in community colleges has tended to oversimplify the concept of *older student*, treating all students above the age of 25 as *older* or *nontraditional* students (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007; Sorey & Duggan, 2008). This homogenization of older students fails to consider the marked differences in life circumstances of students in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and beyond.

Theoretical framework

Human capital and signaling theory provide theoretical rationale for this study. According to signaling theory, a postsecondary credential (e.g., associate degree, certificate) is not only important to employers because of the acquired skills, but also serves as evidence of such qualities as motivation, ability to learn new skills, grit, and work ethic, which may lead to better performance and higher productivity (Adams & Demaiter, 2008; Arkes, 1999). Furthermore, as a means to demonstrate their motivation and ability to learn new skills to employers, obtaining a postsecondary credential may help middle-aged and older adults combat ageist stereotypes.

According to human capital theory, educational investments in people benefit both individuals and society. Individuals benefit from better employment opportunities and higher earnings, while society benefits from improved economic conditions (Becker, 1962; Sweetland, 1996). Consequently, investing in older workers so that they can remain in the labor force longer increases the production of goods and services, resulting in economic growth and increased general revenues through federal and state income taxes, while also reducing the costs of federal assistance programs (Butrica, Johnson, Smith, & Steuerle, 2006). On the other hand, lack of human capital for in-demand jobs negatively affects older workers' employment prospects (Wanberg, 2012). O'Rand (2006) discussed human capital in the context of life course capital, with human capital including education and workforce experience. She views lack of skills and training as a primary cause of social inequality. Funding employment and training programs, therefore, is an additional benefit beyond economic growth because it contributes to reduction of inequalities.

Increased focus on credential attainment

Technological advances have resulted in today's economy demanding a workforce with education and training beyond high school. An estimated 60% of all jobs require some postsecondary education as do 80% of jobs that support a middle-class lifestyle (Carnevale, Gulish, & Strohl, 2018). Postsecondary credentials, such as certificates and associate degrees recognized in the workplace, are associated with lower levels of unemployment, higher labor force participation rates, and greater earnings (BLS, 2019b; Carnevale, Strohl, Cheah, & Ridley, 2017). Recognizing the importance of attainment of a credential beyond high school to increase economic opportunity and improve social mobility, the Lumina Foundation established a goal that by 2025, 60% of Americans will hold a high-quality credential beyond high school. In response, 42 states have set attainment goals consistent with Lumina's goals. In 2016, less than 48% of adult ages 25–64 held such a credential (Lumina Foundation, 2019).

The state of Ohio faces the challenge of a rapidly aging workforce because a significant portion of its workforce is nearing retirement age. By 2030, all baby boomers will have turned 65. Therefore, in order to have a skilled and productive workforce needed for economic success and to meet the needs of employers, the Ohio Department of Higher Education has set a goal that 65% of the working age population will have a postsecondary degree, certificate, or other credential by 2025 (Ohio Department of Higher Education [ODHE], 2018). As of 2018, however, only 44% of Ohioans ages 25 to 64 had such postsecondary credential (ODHE, 2018).

Community colleges and nontraditional students

Historically, community colleges have performed multiple roles. First, they serve as transfer institutions for those who want to pursue a bachelor's degree and continue their studies in a four-year institution after earning an associate degree. Second, community colleges provide occupational training via short-term vocational programs for those who seek immediate employment opportunities or look to upgrade their current skills (Bailey, 2018; Baime & Baum, 2016). Finally, community colleges provide general education by offering a variety of noncredit courses for community members of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of experience (Kasworm, 2012). Recently, however, noncredit course offerings at community colleges have become increasingly important for improving labor market outcomes for nontraditional students. For example, D'Amico, Morgan, Robertson, and Houchins (2014) in their study of one state's community college system found that students ages 25 and older accounted for 61% of noncredit courses enrollments, and that 80% of those courses were for occupational training. Nationally, 60% of noncredit courses offered by community colleges are for occupational training (D'Amico, Morgan, Katsinas, Adair, & Miller, 2017). Due to a shorter completion time short-term occupational credentials are especially appealing to older students. These students have multiple demands on their time and thus are more likely to complete a shorter program without interruptions (Bailey, 2018). Stackable credentials are another way for community colleges to help their students earn more advanced degrees and thus improve their employment prospects. Colleges provide students with an opportunity to build on the credits earned in shorter occupational programs (e.g., certificate programs) to complete a longer-term associate or bachelor's degree (Bailey, 2018). This option allows nontraditional students who work full time to incrementally progress toward a more advanced degree without taking too much time off from work.

Role of community colleges in workforce development

In the past few years community colleges have become the focus of public policy discussions about reskilling the nation's workforce to meet the needs of employers and to compete in the global economy (Osterman & Weaver, 2016). For example, the number of employers who re-train and develop their own workforce due to difficulties in finding skilled talent has more than doubled since 2015 (World Economic Forum, 2018). To help local employers with their workforce training, community colleges have developed programs in manufacturing and other in-demand fields. There are two ways that community colleges can assist employers – by substituting employers' internal training due to the cost and time it requires or by complementing employers' own training to advance their employees' skills and knowledge (Osterman & Weaver, 2016). Community colleges accomplish this by offering postsecondary certificate programs and/or by adding a work-experience component, such as an internship, externship, co-op, clinical experience, or apprenticeship to their associate degree programs (Columbus, 2019).

Certificate programs typically can be completed in a shorter time than an associate degree and they are more occupationally focused. Certificates currently make up 40% of all community college awards, and short-term certificates (one year or less) had grown from 14% to 25% between 2000 and 2015 (Bailey, 2018). Research confirms positive earnings outcomes for those who complete certificate programs, especially in such fields as STEM, nursing, and construction (Bahr, 2016; Belfield & Bailey, 2017; Bettinger & Soliz, 2016). Apprenticeships are usually a combination of on-the-job training and in-classroom learning tailored to a specific occupation. They differ from other types of work-experience programs in that an employer usually pays an apprentice a training wage. Completing an apprenticeship can boost annual earnings by over 6,500 USD on average six years after completion (Columbus, 2019). Additionally, projected employment growth for occupations that require an apprenticeship is 7.4%, which is above average for all occupations (Rolen, 2019).

Method

The research discussed here is a part of the qualitative component of a mixed-methods study that sought to identify malleable factors that could be manipulated through institutional policies and practices to improve educational and employment outcomes for students ages 40 and older enrolled at Ohio's community colleges. The aim of the qualitative portion of the study was to investigate the experiences of older students at community colleges, their barriers to success and unmet needs, and the programs implemented by colleges to promote the recruitment, success, and job placement of older learners. The scope of this paper includes specific strategies that Ohio community colleges employ to improve employment outcomes for students ages 40 and older, and to also meet the needs of local employers (Dikhtyar, Cummins, & McGrew, 2018). In addition, we discuss strategies that employers utilize for workforce development, including noncredit training, and we examine challenges faced by older community college students during recruitment, training, and finding employment. Finally, we discuss implications for policy and practice, which are informed by state pressures to increase the education of the workforce overall and meet the needs of employers.

Data were collected in all 23 of Ohio's community colleges, three of which were case studies. At the case study community colleges, we conducted student and faculty focus groups (12 student groups, $n = 69$; 3 faculty groups, $n = 14$), and 20 key informant interviews with administrators (Dikhtyar et al., 2018). Additional key informant interviews were completed at the remaining 20 community colleges ($n = 42$). Informed consent was obtained to conduct and record all focus groups and individual interviews.

Participants in the student focus groups were between the ages of 40 and 73. Median age was 53 years. There were 47 (68%) females and 22 (32%) males. Among the 57 students who reported their race, 70% ($n = 40$) were White, and 23% ($n = 13$) were Black. The sample also included two Asians, one Hispanic, and one American Indian. Key informants included deans/directors of workforce development, directors of career services and advising, career navigators and counselors, and academic advisers. We also reviewed campus completion plans and websites for each community college.

Focus groups were semi-structured and lasted approximately 120 minutes. Each key informant interview lasted 30–60 minutes. Focus groups and individual interviews were audio recorded. All focus groups and most interviews were transcribed verbatim. Using applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012), an open coding technique was utilized to identify codes and categories grounded in the data, facilitated by Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analytic software. As the research progressed, information learned in earlier interviews was used to inform areas of inquiry in later interviews.

Findings

First, the reasons for older adults to enroll at a community college are discussed. Then, the strategies that Ohio community colleges utilize to improve employment outcomes for older students and to meet the needs of local employers are introduced. They are presented by the following themes: (1) industry-college collaborative program design; (2) integrating academic and occupational/career advising; (3) internships/externships/co-ops; (4) career services/job search; (5) incumbent worker training and apprenticeships; and (6) recruitment of older students. It was sometimes difficult for key informants to distinguish between all nontraditional students (ages 25 and older) and the 40 and older age group when discussing specific strategies. Finally, the following challenges faced by older community college students during recruitment, training, and finding employment are introduced: (1) availability of services; (2) awareness about career services/advising/internships among students; and (3) age discrimination in the workplace/internalized ageism. The strategies and challenges are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Strategies utilized by Ohio community colleges and challenges faced by older students.

Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Industry-college collaborative program design ● Integrating academic and occupational/career advising ● Internships/externships/co-ops ● Career services/job search ● Incumbent worker training and apprenticeships ● Recruitment of older students
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Availability of services ● Awareness about career services/advising/internships among students ● Age discrimination in the workplace/internalized ageism

Student goals/reasons for pursuing training or retraining

Both student and faculty focus groups were asked about reasons why middle-aged and older adults return to school. Reasons ranged from starting a new career or finally earning a degree to personal fulfillment and growth. When considering the reasons older adults enroll at a community college one faculty member observed:

Some of them come back because they've finished raising children, or they've come out of bad relationships, or they have been laid off. And so their purpose is to get an education to get a job. But then there are other students who have worked until they were 55 or 60, and they're just taking classes to improve their English, or to just enjoy the classroom experience. Some of them take it for a grade; some of them take it – some of them just audit. And there the goal is only personal improvement.

For those whose main reason for coming to a community college is to find employment, there have been different precipitating events. Some are tired of doing the same job for many years and want to start a new career. Others have been forced out of their job either because it has become too physically demanding or because they have had an injury or accident that made it impossible for them to perform their work. Yet others lost their job due to an industry shutdown, layoff, or their company/division moving to another state or overseas.

Strategies

Industry-college collaborative program design

Most community colleges work closely with local employers to assess their workforce needs and specific skill sets they require. An administrator at one college reported:

... So, what we do is just go out together to meet with employers because that employer may have the need for an intern. They may have a need for a graduate, or they may have a need for some short-term training. So, wherever possible, uh, we always just try to meet with the employer one time and serve all their needs in that one meeting ...

One of the ways colleges try to accommodate employers' requirements is by creating certificate programs. A key informant at one college called this "understanding by design educational approach." For example, one college has developed certificate programs in welding, computer numerical control (CNC), industrial maintenance, computer aided design (CAD), additive manufacturing (3D printing),

and supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA). These certificate programs provide pathways to the available associate degree programs. Thus, an industrial maintenance certificate can be followed by an industrial technology associate degree program. This gives students the ability to build up from a certificate to an associate degree program, which is tailored to their interests and goals and also meets employer's needs.

Certificate programs are particularly attractive for older adults who want to return to the labor force in the shortest possible time. Here is how one student described it: "What I did was ... okay, first of all, I looked at the certificate programs here because I wanted to get into a job quickly. So, I wanted to look at something that uh ... was short-term and was marketable."

Integrating academic and occupational/career advising

Colleges provide career counseling to help students align their academic goals with their career goals. Although goals and passions are important, consideration of occupational demand is a key aspect to creating awareness by students. One administrator commented:

Well, before we get to the academic advising, we usually have discussions about who they are as a learner, what they see themselves doing. We talk about career choices ... you know, we want to make sure that the students understand what classes they're picking and how those classes lead to a career. It's frustrating for somebody to be, you know, six classes into a program and realize that this isn't what they thought it was at all.

To better understand what a job actually involves, some community colleges also recommend job shadowing and informational interviews to students as early as possible. Workforce development services at the community colleges create pathways for students to become employed in occupations that are in demand in the area. Based on the findings from student focus groups and key informant interviews, this is especially important because most older students want to remain in the community rather than relocate for work.

Internships/externships/co-ops

Community colleges increasingly include a practical component in their programs' curricula. For example, at one college, all engineering, information technology, and business students have mandatory co-ops or internships as a degree requirement, and all health sciences students have mandatory clinical courses. This is very important to older students since having internships or clinicals can result in a job offer, therefore, those students who are in programs without them may be at a disadvantage. Yet, the availability of internships or co-ops is highly dependent on the program of study even within one community college. When asked about the availability of an internship or co-op experience, one student who was in the medical billing specialist program remarked: "No, this program doesn't have it. So that's ... That would be a great thing to have a practicum." However, a student from the health information technology program observed: "... I know that the program I'm in, they call it practicum and you're actually literally going to be doing what you'd be doing in the real world at a facility. And they have that here." She added that her department had a 95% hiring rate for its graduates, and they provided information about available jobs in the field.

Career services/job search

Some key informants observed that older students have inadequate interviewing and resume writing skills, are unaware of proper attire for an interview, or how to provide references, which reduces their likelihood for a successful job search. To address this issue, community colleges provide appropriate training and resources. For example, at one college, career services staff go into classrooms daily to provide resume writing and interviewing skills sessions. In addition, they conduct special events throughout an academic year, such as resume writing and interviewing workshops, etiquette dining nights, and dress for success sessions.

Additionally, colleges provide students with career planning and job search support. One career advisor reported that she meets one-on-one with students and they search the Ohio Means Jobs

website for available jobs by Ohio region. Ohio Means Jobs (ohiomeansjobs.com) is an online portal of the Office of Workforce Development within Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. Ohio Means Jobs centers (by county) assist job seekers and employers with job search, employee recruitment, and job training. One program manager remarked that when talking with individuals in their late 50s–early 60s who want to go into machining, because they know they will be well paid and there are available jobs, he usually asks them: “How long can you physically intend to do this job?” Physical limitations are important to older students when selecting a program of study.

Some colleges provide career services to students through career services portals on their websites in addition to on-campus career services office. For example, several community colleges have a similar Career Coach online tool where students can take career assessment and then browse through available programs offered by the college to learn what jobs they translate to. Alternatively, students can start with their desired career and obtain relevant information on pay, employment, and the necessary education and training. Career Coach also assists students with creating resumes through its resume building tool.

Incumbent worker training and apprenticeships

Several key informants reported they have observed an increase in employers providing and funding training for their employees. One administrator explained that employers are focusing more on upscaling their current workforce due to the challenges they experience with recruiting new employees. He went on to say their college’s workforce development division is specifically oriented toward providing incumbent worker training. They accomplish this in two ways: through training at an employer’s site (noncredit), and through employers providing tuition reimbursement for their workers to complete a certificate, degree, or other for-credit credential.

Apprenticeships are another way for nontraditional students to upgrade their skills or to acquire new skills. Some employers provide apprenticeship grants for students to pay for studies and during on-the-job training. One staff member remarked that they have a good number of older students in their apprenticeship program. Colleges work with students’ employers to identify a list of classes they want their employees to take and employers pay the tuition. Although apprenticeships are still primarily in manufacturing, community colleges are working with employers to establish similar programs in information technology, healthcare, and other industries.

Recruitment of older students

Most key informants recognized that older nontraditional students are difficult to recruit since they are the most heterogeneous and geographically dispersed segment of the population. Several colleges partner with local community organizations and government agencies, such as Ohio Means Jobs (ohiomeansjobs.com), which offers weekly orientations for students who are seeking funding for training, therefore providing colleges with a recruitment opportunity. Other recruitment efforts that colleges employ include attending local job and career fairs, working within correctional facilities in the area, hosting job fairs on campus that include employers and job seekers, and participating in community events. One of the colleges reaches employers through West-Central Ohio Manufacturing Consortium (WCOMC), which is a “group of manufacturers dedicated to improving the manufacturing workforce in the West Central Ohio region.” Another college collaborates with Ohio Manufacturing Association for help with recruitment.

Challenges

Availability of services

The majority of older students work full time and have conflicting family obligations and as a result prefer to enroll in classes that are offered in the evenings or on weekends. Here is one student’s account of the challenge of going to college when working full time and caring for her grandchild:

... So it's been a big adjustment for me because I come to school, I'm getting out and I am running straight up the highway and picking up my grandson, I'm running straight to work. So like today, it's going to be a long day for me. You know? By the time I get off work I am going to be totally exhausted. You know? And then we start another day tomorrow.

Consequently, these students need academic advising, career services, and tutoring to be available in the evening. Generally, all these services are only available during regular business hours, and this continues to be a challenge for community colleges and their students. One student observed:

Honestly, just about everything in my experience is closed. Basic business hours, I would say, nine to five thirty and there's been times when I've had issues come up and they'll say, "Well, just stop by our campus" and I'm, "Well, I'm at work during that time." But it's a basic Monday through Friday, nine to five thirty.

Awareness about career services/advising/internships among students

Although community colleges offer career services and advising, some older students are unaware of these services or of their benefits. One student commented when asked if she was offered career advising at the time of enrollment: "None at all when I first started. No." Another student echoed that sentiment: "I don't know anything about the career services." Yet another student admitted: "Yeah, we know it's [career services] there."

Internships and co-ops are another area with the lack of awareness among students. For example, a student in a two-year business administration program who was a semester away from completing was unaware of whether an internship or practicum was offered. Another student summarized it well in his comment:

... there are couple of offices that have job banks, a know there's one that is a resume bank. I know they're constantly having posters put out in the hallway for internships. So I believe there are some programs out at the college, whether or not they are ... the knowledge of their existence is well disseminated amongst the students is another issue.

Students rely on each other or chat rooms to get the information about in-demand jobs in the area, or if there is an internship or co-op offered in their program of study. Here is one student sharing her strategy:

I went online and saw if there was a market for that particular certificate that they were offering here and so when I looked at that one I thought well I'll put that in. You know? Job opportunities for it. You'd be surprised, there were so many people in these um ... places where you wouldn't have thought where you'd give your opinions and stuff like that.

Age discrimination in the workplace/internalized ageism

We observed a disconnect in older students' perceptions about ageism at the workplace as compared to faculty and key informants' perspectives. For example, one student observed:

... I think it really boils down to a cultural predisposition bias against older people in the work world and you know even though half the workforce is aging maybe eventually after this whole lump of people move through and ... and, uh, retire maybe it'll change as people, you know, the baby boomer lump goes through the whole workforce system. But, I ... I ... I don't know, I think culturally we're just more biased to be favorable to younger people.

Another student suggested: "I think there's ageism in the workplace [that] needs to be emphasized and I don't think that it is in any college."

Most key informants agreed, however, that due to very low unemployment rates, employers are more willing to hire older students upon credential completion than in the past. Employers are seeking workers with a postsecondary credential of value in the workplace; the credential can be either a degree or recognized certificate. Obtaining a credential indicates a willingness to learn, a validation of current skills – and that is what employers are seeking. One key informant remarked: "... If that person is willing to pursue training or come in with those skills, uh, they're an asset. I'm not seeing the discrimination at all. In fact, they're looking for employees who are seasoned and

experienced.” Students perceptions about ageism in the workplace, however, often differed from those of administrators and faculty.

Numerous key informants acknowledged that older students typically fare better with regard to soft skills (e.g., work ethic, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills) because of their life experiences, more exposure to different groups and settings and therefore are better able to navigate social protocols than 18-year-olds. Key informants were also in agreement that lacking soft skills dramatically impacts a candidate’s ability to be successful in obtaining and maintaining employment.

Implications and conclusion

In this paper we discussed a range of strategies that Ohio community colleges employ to help improve labor market outcomes for students ages 40 and older and meet the needs of employers. Our findings are consistent with the literature on the role of community colleges in addressing America’s skill gap. Ohio community colleges play an important role in helping local employers with workforce development while at the same time strive to improve employment outcomes for older nontraditional students which they accomplish through credit and noncredit program offerings. They offer certificate programs tailored to employers’ requirements that make students who earned them immediately employable but at the same time provide pathways for students to build up to a related associate degree if they want to pursue more education. They provide incumbent worker training, both at an employers’ site and in-house, along with apprenticeship programs. Finally, they offer a work-experience component as part of their degree programs. Work experience is especially important for older students because an internship or clinical assignment offers an advantage in job placement that would otherwise not be available.

Most of the above strategies are aimed at all nontraditional students (ages 25 and older) and it appears that community colleges generally have a good understanding of the needs of that student population. However, the fact that some key informants could not make a distinction between all nontraditional students and the 40 and older age group indicates that the unique needs and circumstances of these students may be overlooked by community colleges. More focused recruitment and marketing efforts are needed to increase community college enrollment of middle-aged and older adults. In addition, more flexibility and availability of services is needed because the majority of older nontraditional students attend college on a part-time basis and have multiple demands on their time. Creating awareness among older students about available programs and services is another important aspect that needs improvement as our findings demonstrate that having a service or program in place does not help students if they are unaware of it. Furthermore, although most community colleges provide their students with appropriate career advising and job search strategies, older students may require more personalized services when applying for jobs online since they are often not as digitally savvy as their younger counterparts and are not familiar with this process. As a result of the tight labor market, employers seem more willing to fund training for workers of all ages. Close working relationships among community colleges, employers, and state agencies are important to ensure Ohio has a skilled and globally competitive workforce.

The key strength of this study is that it includes data from focus group interviews with community college students and faculty in addition to individual interviews with administrators which allows for comparison of diverse perspectives. Thus, this study contributes to an under-researched topic by not only exploring strategies for improving employment outcomes for community college students ages 40 and older but also by illuminating unique challenges faced by these students during recruitment, training, and finding employment. Nevertheless, the study findings cannot be generalized, because they are limited to Ohio community colleges and only reflect the views and opinions of a small number of students, faculty, and administrators interviewed.

Funding

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A160156 to Miami University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

ORCID

Oksana Dikhtyar  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3763-642X>

Peter Riley Bahr  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6574-2644>

References

- Adams, T. L., & Demaiter, E. I. (2008). Skill, education and credentials in the new economy: The case of information technology workers. *Work, Employment and Society*, 22(2), 351–362. doi:10.1177/0950017008089109
- Arkes, J. (1999). What do educational credentials signal and why do employers value credentials? *Economics of Education Review*, 18(1), 133–141. doi:10.1016/S0272-7757(98)00024-7
- Bahr, P. R. (2016). The earnings of community college graduates in california. a capsee working paper. Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment. Retrieved from <https://capseecenter.org/the-earnings-of-community-college-graduates-in-california/>
- Bailey, T. (2018). Responding to divergent trends: Vocational and transfer education at community colleges. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 50(3–4), 113–116. doi:10.1080/00091383.2018.1509634
- Baime, D., & Baum, S. (2016). *Community colleges: Multiple missions, diverse student bodies, and a range of policy solutions*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/83551/2000899-community-colleges-multiple-missions-diverse-student-bodies-and-a-range-of-policy-solutions_2.pdf
- Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 485–540. doi:10.3102/00346543055004485
- Becker, G. S. (1962). Investment in human capital: A theoretical analysis. *Journal of Political Economy*, 70(5, Part 2), 9–49. doi:10.1086/258724
- Belfield, C., & Bailey, T. (2017). *The labor market returns to sub-baccalaureate college: A review. A CAPSEE working paper*. Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment. Retrieved from <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/labor-market-returns-sub-baccalaureate-college-review.html>
- Bettinger, E., & Soliz, A. (2016). *Returns to vocational credentials: Evidence from Ohio's community and technical colleges*. A CAPSEE working paper. Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED571789.pdf>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp0630a
- Butrica, B. A., Johnson, R. W., Smith, K. E., & Steuerle, C. E. (2006). The implicit tax on work at older ages. *National Tax Journal*, 59(2), 211–234. doi:10.17310/ntj.2006.2.00
- Calcagno, J. C., Crosta, P., Bailey, T., & Jenkins, D. (2007). Does age of entrance affect community college completion probabilities? Evidence from a discrete-time hazard model. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 29(3), 218–235. doi:10.3102/0162373707306026
- Carnevale, A., Gulish, A., & Strohl, J. (2018). *Educational adequacy in the twenty-first century*. Washington, DC: The Century Foundation's Working Group on Community College Financial Resources. Retrieved from <https://tcf.org/content/report/educational-adequacy-twenty-first-century/>
- Carnevale, A., Strohl, J., Cheah, B., & Ridley, N. (2017). *Good jobs that pay without a BA*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from <https://goodjobsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/Good-Jobs-wo-BA.pdf>
- Coile, C. (2018). *Working longer in the US: Trends and explanations* (No. w24576). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from <https://www.nber.org/chapters/c14052.pdf>
- Columbus, R. (2019). *Nondegree credentials, work-based learning and the American working class*. American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.aei.org/publication/nondegree-credentials-work-based-learning-and-the-american-working-class/>
- D'Amico, M. M., Morgan, G., Robertson, S., & Houchins, C. (2014). An exploration of noncredit community college enrollment. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62(3), 152–162. doi:10.1080/07377363.2014.953438
- D'Amico, M. M., Morgan, G. B., Katsinas, S. G., Adair, J. L., & Miller, M. T. (2017). A national analysis of noncredit community college education: Enrollment, funding, accountability, and contextual issues. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 41(4–5), 288–302. doi:10.1080/10668926.2016.1251349

- Dikhtyar, O., Cummins, P., & McGrew, K. (2018, November). *Strategies community colleges use to improve labor market outcomes for older workers: Barriers and opportunities*. Paper presented at the Gerontological Society of America 2018 Annual Scientific Meeting, Boston. Abstract retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6227295/>
- Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2012). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hickman, D. C., & Olney, W. W. (2011). Globalization and investment in human capital. *ILR Review*, 64(4), 654–672. doi:10.1177/001979391106400402
- Hsu, Y. S. (2013). Training older workers: A review. In J. Field, R. J. Burke, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of aging, work and society* (pp. 283–299). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Johnson, R. W. (2007). *Managerial attitudes toward older workers: A review of the evidence* (Discussion Paper 07-05). Retrieved from the Urban Institute website: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411548_managerial_attitudes.pdf
- Kasworm, C. E. (2012). US adult higher education: One context of lifelong learning. *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, 5(1), 1. Retrieved from <https://web-a-ebscohost-com.proxy.lib.miamioh.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=50d2c42e-4462-4826-89d4-8e4532e8218f%40sdc-v-sessmgr03>
- Lacey, T. A., Toossi, M., Dubina, K. S., & Gensler, A. B. (2017, October). Projections overview and highlights, 2016–26. *Monthly Labor Review*, 1–25. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/pdf/projections-overview-and-highlights-2016-26.pdf>
- Lumina Foundation. (2019). *A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*. Retrieved from <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/0d0b61a0-362e-4dcc-91cb-de83be7eeddc>
- Munnell, A. H. (2015). *The average retirement age: An update*. Center for Retirement Research at Boston College Issue Brief #15-4. Retrieved from https://crr.bc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/IB_15-4_508_rev.pdf
- O’Rand, A. M. (2006). Stratification and the life course: Life course capital, life course risks, and social inequality. In R. H. Binstock & L. K. George (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (Vol. 162, 6th ed., pp. 145). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Ohio Department of Higher Education. (2018). *Ohio attainment goal 2025: 2018 Annual report*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohiohighered.org/attainment>
- Osterman, P., & Weaver, A. (2016). Community colleges and employers: How can we understand their connection? *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 55(4), 523–545. Retrieved from <https://web-a-ebscohost-com.proxy.lib.miamioh.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=e3f6ca3f-cf9d-4fec-bd45-2a176fa30799%40sdc-v-sessmgr01>
- Rolen, E. (2019). *Occupational employment projections through the perspective of education and training*. Spotlight on Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2019/education-projections/pdf/education-projections.pdf>
- Schulz, J. H. (2000). “The full Monty” and life-long learning in the 21st century. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 11 (2–3), 71–82. doi:10.1300/J031v11n02_08
- Sorey, K. C., & Duggan, M. H. (2008). Differential predictors of persistence between community college adult and traditional aged students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 32(2), 75–100. doi:10.1080/10668920701380967
- Sweetland, S. R. (1996). Human capital theory: Foundations of a field of inquiry. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 341–359. doi:10.3102/00346543066003341
- The Council of Economic Advisors. (2018). *Addressing America’s reskilling challenge*. Washington, DC: Office of the President. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Addressing-Americas-Reskilling-Challenge.pdf>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019a, September). *Employment projections. Civilian labor force, by age, sex, race, and ethnicity*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/civilian-labor-force-summary.htm>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019b, September). *Employment projections. Civilian labor force participation rate by age, sex, race, and ethnicity*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/civilian-labor-force-participation-rate.htm>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2018, Spring). *National center for education statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)*. Fall Enrollment component. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_303.55.asp?current=yes
- Wanberg, C. R. (2012). The individual experience of unemployment. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63(1), 369–396. doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-120710-100500
- World Economic Forum. (2018). *Towards a reskilling revolution: A future of jobs for all*. Report. Retrieved from http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FOW_Reskilling_Revolution.pdf