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HEALTH CARE



GREEN TECH

Job Market

Retraining U.

Smart community colleges earn an A for partnering with local businesses to recareer older workers

BY LAURA DAILY PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERU ONISHI

■ David Kieffer saw it coming, but still it stung. The 56-year-old from Eagle River, Wisconsin, had worked for three years as a carpenter's assistant, watching helplessly as home construction dried up. By the end of 2009 he was jobless and unable to find steady work. "I'd never had a problem finding a job before," he says. "I must have sent out 50 résumés—and didn't receive one reply." For a year he took odd jobs through a temp service.

Then, in January, Kieffer learned that Nicolet College, in nearby Rhinelander, was offering specialized job-training classes in cooperation with local employers. After being assessed by a Nicolet career counselor, Kieffer enrolled in computer literacy, blueprint

reading, applied technical mathematics, and other courses, all geared toward obtaining a Manufacturing Fundamentals certificate.

Three months later one of Kieffer's instructors, an employee at HyPro Inc., a local machine shop that provides parts to industrial clients, recommended him for an interview. "Before I got home, there was a message that I'd start the following Monday," he says.

Kieffer had lucked into one of the best secrets in job retraining: community colleges. Politicians have paid a lot of lip service to the need to retrain displaced older workers, but most government programs have been ineffective. Private vocational institutes and for-profit colleges, meanwhile, sometimes inflate employment prospects. Community colleges that offer retraining programs in partnership with local employers have stepped into the breach.

"Few people think of a community college as a place to turn, but these schools create relationships with local businesses," says William J. Holstein, author of *The Next American Economy: Blueprint for a Real Recovery*, which examines the challenges of retraining displaced older workers. "Many potential employers sit on curriculum advisory committees or teach classes, meaning that graduates have a greater chance of getting hired."

Another benefit for cash-strapped job seekers: Community college tuitions average \$2,700 a year—typically just one-fifth that of private, for-profit colleges and vocational schools. Flexible class scheduling (nights, weekends, or online) allows students to work part-time while studying. Moreover, community colleges offer, well, a *community*. "We



EDUCATION

Employment 101

Wonder which professions are looking for workers? Around the country, grads of all ages are landing jobs in these fields:

- ✓ Solar and wind energy
- ✓ Computer-assisted manufacturing
- ✓ Education, teaching in critical-need subject areas such as math and science
- ✓ Health care, working as home health aide, patient advocate, pharmacy technician
- ✓ Nonprofit and government support staff
- ✓ Social services, assisting other older adults as an eldercare specialist

provide a support system of assessment, career counseling, and job placement," explains Norma Kent, a senior vice president of the American Association of Community Colleges, which represents 1,200 schools. "We don't put you in a position to fail."

Socorro Flores, 63, counts herself a community college success story. In March 2010, after 22 years as a machine operator and then a custodian (to avoid being downsized) with Wrigley Manufacturing in Yorkville, Illinois, Flores was handed a pink

slip and a retirement package. "My unemployment checks and severance weren't going to cut it," she says. "I had to find a job."

Flores realized she had to not only ramp up her skills—"I barely knew how to turn on a computer"—but acquire new ones. Homing in on Flores's desire to help people, a career counselor at Joliet Junior College (JJC) enrolled her in JJC's Plus 50 program, designed to retrain older workers. Flores took computer classes and completed an eight-week Alzheimer's at Home course to care for those with dementia. While at JJC, she also volunteered with Catholic Charities as a senior companion. That led first to part-time work at a local assisted living facility, then as a full-time private caregiver.

USING INPUT from local employers, community colleges are able to design certificate programs to train workers who meet these companies' unique needs. With more than 450 bioscience businesses in northeast Ohio, Cleveland's Cuyahoga Community College, for example, offers job-skill development programs in the manufacturing of medical devices or pharmaceutical drugs. Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan, partners with CVS/Pharmacy stores to provide on-the-job experience as part of Macomb's pharmacy-technician certification.

Other schools, such as GateWay Community College in Phoenix, Arizona, train job-seeking boomers for work at area nonprofits and government agencies. EducateVA, offered by the Virginia Community



AVERAGE DURATION OF UNEMPLOYMENT FOR 55+ WORKERS AS OF MAY 2011

YOUR MONEY

College System, allows individuals with bachelor's degrees to become provisionally licensed in 16 weeks to teach math or science in middle schools and high schools. "Traditional teaching programs typically take a minimum of two years," says Rebecca Waters, one of the program's developers. "Not only do we fast-track, but it costs students only about \$4,000." EducateVA boasts an almost 80 percent placement rate, with entry-level teacher's salaries averaging \$42,000.

The boomer + community college + retraining = jobs equation is as much a win for employers as it is for new employees. Before teaming with Nicolet College, HyPro's plant manager, Mike Sutton, struggled to fill critical positions. "Rhineland is more of a vacation destination, and even during the recession, when our company was going through a growth spurt, we were lucky to find even

one skilled worker a year," he says.

In early 2010, HyPro joined with 12 other manufacturing businesses to develop a curriculum at Nicolet, going so far as to provide instructors and opening their facilities for site visits. "We each pledged that if someone graduated from the Manufacturing Fundamentals program, we would interview them," Sutton says. So far, HyPro has hired six graduates.

Although community colleges can help land you a job in as little as four weeks, many of those positions pay barely a few bucks more than minimum wage. Those that pay better require more class time and, perhaps, more money out of your pocket. One strategy, says Holstein, is to enroll in a relatively quick and inexpensive program just to get a new job, then continue to study at night or on weekends to qualify for a higher-paying position.

That's the plan for both Flores and Kieffer. "If it wasn't for JJC, I wouldn't have gotten my job," says Flores, who hopes to continue her schooling to become a certified nursing assistant. "They taught me you are never too old to go back to school." Kieffer has his eye on more advanced Nicolet programs, including the Manufacturing Essentials certificate, so he can move up the HyPro ladder. "I've had so many jobs in so many places," he says. "Hopefully this will be the last place I work. That would be sweet!"

Laura Daily is a contributing editor for AARP THE MAGAZINE.

To locate a community college in your area, check out the website of the American Association of Community Colleges at aacc.nche.edu or aacc.nche.edu/pages/ccfinder.aspx.

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Back of the Envelope

"Hire" Education

Here's how long it can take to retrain at local community colleges for three popular new careers — and how much they pay.

	HOW LONG	HOW MUCH
• Caregiving (home health aides, nursing aides)	1 week to 3 months	\$21,760 to \$25,140 (\$10 to \$12/hour)
• Manufacturing (machine operators, production workers)	5 to 6 months	\$18,720 to \$41,600 (\$9 to \$20/hour)
• Solar panel installation	1 week to 4 months	\$33,980 to \$50,000 (\$16 to \$24/hour)