

Project E.A.R.N.E.D
(Enrollment, Achievement, Retention,
Negotiation, Employment and
Development)

Crystal D. Gardner, Ed.D.



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Real-World Project Submitted By: Crystal D. Gardner, Ed.D.

Program Director-Workforce Instruction, Houston Community College

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Introduction

More than half of the workforce will need to learn new skills to perform their jobs. Millions of adults have continued to seek out opportunities to upskill and reskill, leading many to certificate programs and additional training opportunities. Due to a great need for change in the current workforce climate, on November 15, 2021, President Joe Biden signed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act). This act was created to provide good-paying union jobs, growing the economy sustainably and equitably for decades to come (The White House, 2022).

As part of the \$1 trillion in infrastructure spending, substantial workforce development and training funds have been made available to four major departments: Commerce, Energy, Labor, and Transportation. While the funds may not be specifically targeted toward postsecondary institutions, the federal law does recognize that community and technical colleges will serve as possible providers for the training and education of individuals.

The role of the advisor has evolved over the years. The specific expectations and responsibilities related to academic advising vary by institution, resulting in roles that are often vaguely defined and outcomes that are inconsistently assessed (Troxel et al., 2022). The success of an institution's enrollment, retention, and completion rates heavily relies on the efficacy of academic advising, retention, coursework, and instruction. Because the 21 campuses of Houston Community College (HCC) make it one of the largest community college systems in the area, its faculty and staff, in addition to those employed by neighboring community colleges and technical schools, will benefit from a comprehensive understanding of industry data, labor market trends, and updates within the workforce that affect the overall infrastructure of programming and enrollment, retention, and completion rates.

By starting with an analysis of individual institutional Perkins Grant Evaluation Improvement Plans and Perkins Grant Data Resources, institutional leaders are able to identify the greatest areas of need and gaps in policies and programming (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2023). Through this analysis, specific industry trends and areas in which demand is high are highlighted. This project sought to benefit departments of workforce instruction, specifically those that exist to support the systemwide efforts of HCC's Centers of Excellence and Continuing Education programs.

Purpose

Enrollment and retention are an ongoing challenge and may often be linked to pathways of program completion and the ability to provide credentials of value that lead to employment in in-demand, high-wage occupations. Through the development of staff who are competent and responsive to industry needs and trends, and who provide valuable advisement and course offerings, a strong foundation is developed. Being aware of all available programming and pathways the institution offers, in addition to pairing and creating pathway plans based on industry trends, allows for the creation of comprehensive pathways to employable skills and opportunities. Project E.A.R.N.E.D. (Enrollment, Achievement, Retention, Negotiation, Employment, and Development) seeks to develop strategic plans, training, and developmental opportunities that aid in closing institutional gaps through the refinement of programming. The goal is to ensure that equitable programs are being offered so all students have access to training that leads to high-wage, in-demand employment. Students will also benefit from being able to articulate not-for-credit training to for-credit programs, should they desire to do so.

Ensuring that workforce leadership and faculty have access to and fully understand economic modeling software and forecasting allows for more informed decisions to be made regarding program offerings. While cyclical professional development opportunities for workforce leadership, academic advisors, and other institutional stakeholders provide provisions for more strategic planning and offerings that are relevant to industry data and trends. Such initiatives produce a commitment to excellence in providing high-wage, in-demand program offerings. Additionally, producing a more robust set of program and certificate completers through strategically planning and processing recommendations, not to merge, but better align credit and noncredit programs, which provides more structure, equity, integrity, and integration of programming.

Postsecondary Career Technical Education (CTE) advisement and comprehensive programming are essential to enrollment, credentialing, and postsecondary retention and placement. Project E.A.R.N.E.D. is based on the trajectory the optimal student would follow on their pathway toward a degree or certificate program. Ideally, we would like students to enroll in a program and achieve academically, while retaining these students for the duration of programming. As a result, students should be able to negotiate high-wage and in-demand employment based on their earned credentials while continuing to develop themselves through continuous learning, microcredentialing, and/or stackable credentials.

Project E.A.R.N.E.D allows for a series of four quarterly modules that will keep institutional personnel abreast of industry needs, trends, and updates to provide quality coursework, offerings, and advising while closing industry gaps, as indicated by improvements and increases in graduation/completion rates and sustainable employment.

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Upon identification of institutional data and historical and current industry trends, identified personnel will have participated in a series of four training modules covering the following areas of need:

- What's Trending—Industry Trends and Program Awareness and Involvement
- The Model Student Experience—Career Exploration and Exposure to Credentials of Value
- Dollars and Cents—Top Industry Comparisons, Pay Rates, and Skills Requirements
- Recruitment and Retention—Where to Find and How to Identify and Prepare Highly Skilled Workforce-Ready Individuals

What's Trending

What's Trending is a deep dive into industry trends and program awareness and involvement as they relate to current labor market trends. Data sources such as Lightcast, Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins) reports, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2018–2019 Exit Cohort Report, and the 21–22 The Automated Student and Adult Learner Follow-Up System are used to demonstrate the utilization of such data sources to drive program offerings.

The Model Student Experience

The Model Student Experience involves the identification and evaluation of the characteristics of current student pathways, while examining examples of the alignment and integration of credit and noncredit curriculum and programming into stackable credentials and credentials of value in high-wage, in-demand industries.

Dollars and Cents

Dollars and Cents is a deep dive into the region's top industry comparisons, pay rates, attributes, and most requested skill sets, while aligning to the current curriculum and program offerings. Participants will explore student and faculty tools to ensure the alignment of curriculum crosswalks and to ensure that the coursework being offered prepares students for positions in high-wage, in-demand industries.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and Retention provides a deep dive into existing and current credit and noncredit programming to identify new and innovative ways to locate and identify highly skilled individuals to take through opportunities for online or in-person certifications that end in a badge/credential while the student either continues to work toward a degree or enhances their current employment by obtaining credentials of value.

As a result of completing the series of training modules and updates, institutional personnel should be able to incorporate updates and information into practice, thus establishing more effective and research-based practices for the refinement of offerings and programming that will ultimately create pathways to credentials of value. Postsecondary advisement and comprehensive

programming are essential to enrollment, retention, credentialing, and placement. Systemic development and implementation will positively affect both the student population and higher education personnel. Taking individuals through these modules will help them to access and process information on a deeper level, while maintaining a deeper understanding of career pathways in their entirety and the role they play in assisting learner populations in accessing in-demand, high-wage programming. The improvement of program knowledge, offerings, and outcomes will also be evident, which will lead to better advisement of student pathways and program offerings that are more aligned with and leading to in-demand, high-wage occupations, as opposed to students being relegated to pathways with limited opportunities for growth.

Background

Prekindergarten students considered “at risk” are offered the Head Start program, which was developed to work with families to help break the cycle of poverty. All students are not afforded a head start. Thus, the “school to prison pipeline,” which is the disproportionate tendency of minors and young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds to become incarcerated because of academic and environmental factors. However, many still believe that standardized tests, literacy, and dropout rates are taken into consideration at the state level when planning for future incarceration facilities. What many of these students have not been afforded is sustainable intervention and a guide toward a postsecondary professional finish line.

The nation’s eighth largest school district and the largest school district in the state of Texas feed into HCC. As with many other institutions, the college has had to adjust as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. As of 2020, HCC had 81,256 unduplicated total students enrolled as indicated by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Of these students, an average of 566 earned certificates that took at least 1 year but less than 2 years to complete, while 834 earned certificates that took at least 12 weeks but less than 1 year to complete.

HCC serves some of the most marginalized populations in the area. According to the HCC Fact Book, 38.5% of HCC students are Hispanic, and 27.9% are Black. In accordance with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2018–2019 Exit Cohort Report, the impact of workforce serviced a cohort group subtotal of 803 Hispanic students and 706 African American technical completers. The top three areas of enrollment for these technical completers were general studies; construction engineering technology/technician; and business administration and management, general. Of the completer cohorts, the top five industries for employment were general medical and surgical hospitals; employment services; executive, legislative, and other general government support; offices of physicians; and restaurants and other eating places.

The alignment of coursework and programming of the aforementioned areas has become a recent area of attention. Informed and trained leaders and staff will assist in relieving the relegation of students into stagnant pathways and move students into succinct programming geared toward high-wage, in-demand fields at a rate of acceleration that will allow for the earnings of wages

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both while in certificate programs and at the completion of degree programming. Short-term training programs can provide a timely solution for the high number of non-credentialed workers who have been displaced because of the coronavirus pandemic (Education Strategy Group, 2023). According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, African American certificate holders receive the lowest wages and one of the smallest wage premiums.

The divide between credit and noncredit programming can be severe and result in an obstruction of pathways. Such dissension occurs in programming, stakeholder, and operational differences. Programmatic differences often show up through the duplication of structure, courses, and credit designation. Stakeholder differences allow for varying student experiences and differing staff and qualifications resulting in real and perceived stratification. Operational differences in funding, financial aid, student services, and technology result in inefficiencies across the board (Education Strategy Group, 2020).

Perkins is the primary federal law aimed at developing and supporting CTE programs for secondary and postsecondary students. This act now speaks to the development of more robust academic knowledge and technical and employability skills of secondary and postsecondary students who elect to enroll in CTE programs. More than \$1.3 billion was appropriated in fiscal year (FY) 2021 for Perkins V (Congressional Research Service, 2022).

Method of Evaluation

The data collection process for this project utilized mixed methods research design using preexisting and historical data in addition to a perceptions survey to determine and identify the greatest areas of need as measured by core indicators and analyzing institutional programs leading to employment in in-demand and high-wage occupations.

During the 2020–21 school year, HCC employed more than 39,000 full-time employees and 14,000 part-time employees, which included academic advisors, academic success coaches, instructors, and instructional leaders. These individuals were an optimal target audience, as their roles are a vital component of the overall success of the institution. The initial pre-survey instrument had the potential to affect a minimum of 6,421 marginalized learners who are academic, technical, or tech-prep completers, as measured by the cohort subgroups in the most recent 2018–2019 Exit Cohort Reports.

To garner the support and permission of the institution, I completed the HCC Institutional Review Board process to conduct a survey titled “The Effects of Industry PD on Advising, Planning, Instruction for Career Pathways.” This instrument surveyed the perceptions of a workforce professional learning community of executive leadership, deans, chairs, and directors. This leadership group oversees a large group of instructional staff, academic advisors, and student success coaches. The initial 5-minute survey instrument was conducted via Microsoft Forms and later developed into a Qualtrics survey instrument, which contained a total 10 questions. It served as a pre-assessment and established the baseline population and greatest

areas of need and focus for subsequent training and development modules, as measured by the perceptions and background knowledge of workforce leadership.

A follow-up instrument for faculty and staff was developed and disseminated. They were surveyed on their perceptions of the efficacy of professional development in workforce development. Additionally, meetings were set up with approval influencers such as research and development and the two associate vice chancellors of workforce to garner their support throughout the project and ensure that timelines were met as close to target as possible. The pre-assessment survey instrument highlighted the current institutional needs and employee perceptions of industry knowledge and trends. In addition, the instrument established a baseline and a basis for institutional professional development needs regarding understanding industry trends in the workforce and their impact on overall programming and student outcomes. An exit survey will be disseminated at the end of each professional development opportunity to measure the efficacy of the training modules and their impact on professional performance and the proficiency of the workforce faculty and staff.

Summary of Findings

Some barriers to data collection were participation and obtaining buy-in from internal stakeholders, thus resulting in lower participation than expected. While executive leadership are aware of the discrepancies, it is often a paradigm shift to demonstrate the value of such information and how it may be used toward the efficacy of programming. Thus, the data collection was based on a much smaller population of leaders than expected and an even lower response rate from those stakeholders who report to such leaders. In addition, institutional approval processes took longer than expected and/or had varying criteria for processing.

Based on the data collected from the workforce leadership professional learning community regarding “The Effects of Industry PD on Advising, Planning, Instruction for Career Pathways,” as it relates to their own background knowledge and the perceptions of that of their staff, the results were as follows:

- More than 50% of leaders meet with their staff once a month.
- Most leaders currently deliver news or updates to their teams about industry trends and information via team meetings or email.
- The majority of leaders believed that workforce leadership should be closely involved with faculty and staff professional development. They also strongly agreed that when hiring faculty and staff, it was more important to focus on education and professional experience than certifications.
- The majority of leaders ranked their employees 33% average and 33% good in career advising, 44% average and 33% good in instructional planning, and 56% good and 33% average in student assessment. Curriculum planning was indicated as the lowest area of proficiency.

- As it relates to the leader's own level of expertise, 33% had either an intermediate or basic knowledge of the utilization of economic modeling, while 22% had basic knowledge and 33% had limited knowledge of how to explain the impact of the economic forecasting data. Forty-four percent had limited knowledge regarding the conducting of research using local economic development trends and processing.
- The top professional development opportunities leaders believe it would most strongly impact their staff's professional development opportunities on industry data and trends (44%) and identifying student characteristics (67%).
- Forty-four percent of leaders would like to see professional development opportunities made available seasonally, while 33% would like monthly opportunities. Fifty-six percent of leaders expressed that they had some comfort level interpreting the data presented in the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board reports or Perkins data resources.

Recommendations

As a result of the analysis of data obtained through the survey of workforce leadership, it is evident that a deeper dive into industry data and trends as they relate to programming pathways and student outcomes is warranted. These professional development opportunities should begin with identifying and developing personnel using "What's Trending—Industry Trends and Program Awareness and Involvement."

Continuous development and training of staff in the greatest areas of need found within the survey instrument and instructional historical data will need to be provided on a cyclical basis. The alignment of staffing models will need to be addressed, and the allocation of appropriate positions to support this work is warranted. The college has already begun to see the value of such work. During this research the Department of Workforce Research and Development and Instruction has also found value in such work and reiterated the importance of research and development to drive programming and student outcomes on a full-time basis, thus allowing for the development of newly funded positions of program director-workforce instruction and CTE data analyst.

As the newly appointed program director-workforce instruction, I have the opportunity to take the research obtained and become a catalyst for tangible change. It is my charge to continue to build on the research and execute training and development opportunities that support the alignment of credit and noncredit programming, improving program knowledge, offerings, and outcomes, which will lead to better advisement of student pathways and program offerings that are more aligned with and leading to in-demand, high-wage occupations. As a result of the completion and implementation of this project, the comprehensive training and development plans are requirements in the job description of the position I now hold. Thus, comprehensive exploration and research of current practices and policies, as compared to other best practices policies, will be conducted. A series of training and development modules that will contribute to the closing of institutional performance gaps and increases in enrollment, retention, and program completions will continue to be developed in conjunction with implementation of faculty and

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staff resources and use of labor market data to determine needs and offerings as compared to current industry needs and requests.

Additionally, research-based task forces such as the Aligning Non-Credit and Credit Task Force have been developed to build pathways between noncredit and credit credentials, while developing on-ramps and connections among programs and credentials of value. This task force will use the Education Strategy Group (2022) framework to guide the practices of alignment. The Department of Workforce Instruction has also been approved for the FY 2024 Perkins State Leadership award to continue advancing economic justice, which has resulted in the securing of several positions to move this work forward and into fruition.

To continue the use of Project E.A.R.N.E.D. as a support to an equity-focused postsecondary CTE leader and program, the following recommendations are proposed to ensure that systemic measures are in place that address the gaps and greatest areas of need identified:

- Use instructional specific professional development days for College of Excellence-specific training and updates.
- Align departments and governance by bringing noncredit and for-credit degree programs together under joint leadership and a more aligned staffing model (faculty, curriculum, and administration integration).
- Make programs “credit worthy” or “credit based.” This designation allows for credit when students transition to a degree program in addition to receiving accreditation for industry-focused programs.
- Remove barriers to transition by streamlining transitioning and making choosing pathways that are appropriate to their needs accessible and clear for students. Provide distinct and appropriate training for academic advisors, while creating positions and/or additional training for the specific advising of the workforce student population. Additionally, make success coaches, career coaches, and/or career planning and interest tools available for areas within the workforce to guide clear pathways and options for both current and prospective students.

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