

Insights from Guided Pathways Webinar:

“Converting Short-Term Course-Takers to Graduates”

Presented in December 2022 by Kathy Booth,

project director, Educational Data and Policy at WestEd.

Who can use this: administrators, faculty, classified staff, institutional researchers

PRESENTATION OBJECTIVES:

- ◆ Understand skills builders and how they leverage short-term course-taking to improve earnings.
- ◆ Demonstrate clear opportunities for skills builders and embed course-taking into Guided Pathways maps given their existing career and college experiences.
- ◆ Learn how to assess the data to discern which courses lead to economic mobility and growth so students can make informed decisions.

Keywords: adult learners, completion, economic mobility, equity, Guided Pathways, living wage, skills builders, student parents



Skills Builders to Completers

USING DATA TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNERS AND GROW ENROLLMENT

A growing number of Californians return to college throughout their lives to increase economic mobility as 21st century jobs demand new skills. Working learners, student parents and many of today’s students need guided pathways that incorporate high-quality short- and long-term certificates and degrees that lead to fruitful careers and living wages. To better serve these lifelong learners, community colleges have an opportunity to better understand their needs and course-taking patterns and incorporate the credentials they seek into guided pathways.

WestEd and other researchers use the term “skills builders” to describe community college students who enroll for a short period of time (often one to two semesters) and successfully complete a few credits, which are mostly in career and technical fields. College teams have opportunities in their guided pathways work to ensure course sequences are better structured for skills builder students and enable them to explore paths that support their life circumstances, aspirations and goals.

This brief shares key insights about how college professionals can use regional economic data to help students understand the value of credentials that they can achieve in one to two semesters versus the value of longer-term credentials and associate degrees. Encouraging short-term course-takers into longer educational pathways not only supports enrollment but also can impact metrics such as persistence and completion. In her webinar presentation, Kathy Booth provides insights on skills builders to help college professionals align coursework for them in a student-centered way.

“The more we understand the skills that are embedded in our curriculum that our students are choosing to learn about by doing short-term course-taking that is directly career related, we can stop thinking about ourselves in terms of academic disciplines and instead about the clusters of skills that help people stack on the knowledge that they gained in the workplace to be able to move up to higher-level positions.

— Kathy Booth, *Project Director, Educational Data and Policy, WestEd*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Skills builders are a critical population of community college students, and they have different goals and motives for earning additional education.

- ◆ About 1 in 7 students at California Community Colleges is a skills builder.
- ◆ A majority of skills builders have not previously earned a certificate or degree and don't earn one during their time in community college. Some skills builders seek skills and knowledge to qualify for entry-level positions, and others are upskilling or reskilling to earn wage gains.
- ◆ Skills builders would often benefit from engaging in longer-term pathways to improve their earnings and increase their economic mobility. Increasingly, a higher level of educational attainment is needed to get a living wage job and open up more career choices.

2. Focusing on skills builders can help institutions grow enrollment.

Colleges can grow enrollment by focusing on students who are already seeking to expand their education. Skills builders are a great segment of the student population to focus on for several reasons:



- ◆ **They are current students:** Skills builders are adults who have an understanding of how to navigate the often tricky registration and enrollment process. They also tend to be highly successful in their courses.
- ◆ **They can help forge the path for future students:** Working with skills builders could be a strategic opportunity to attract more skills builders who could later be converted into students seeking an associate degree, transfer, or completion of a certificate. If colleges articulate skills builders' course sequences and the economic value of postsecondary credentials more explicitly, students may be more likely to transition from one to two courses into longer-term pathways.
- ◆ **They can help institutions achieve more enrollments and completion:** If institutions articulate how skills builder course-taking relates to existing or planned certificates and degrees (such as how credentials “stack”), students can more easily identify on-ramps to longer programs or opportunities for upskilling.
- ◆ **They can help institutions gain clarity about the regional labor market:** Skills builders come into college with career experience. If colleges map discrete skill sets against program offerings and the labor market demand, they can better prepare students for work while also focusing on employer engagement.

3. Skills builders have varied economic outcomes, but more courses tend to lead to increased earnings.

Skills builder course sequences often support economic gains, but many do not advance students from poverty to living wages. Students who moved up an economic rung took more courses than those who got more money in their pockets or who had additional earnings. A relatively small group of students do not see economic benefits.

Research has found different course combinations have different economic returns. The following chart outlines examples of course combinations in two fields of study that yield economic returns at each level.

EXAMPLES OF COURSE COMBINATIONS WITH DIFFERENT ECONOMIC RETURNS

Field of study	No returns	More money in their pockets	Additional earnings for those already making a living wage	Move up an economic rung
Health	Medical/ Clinical Assistant	Nurse Aide Training	Health Information Management	Heart Saver First Aid
Precision Production	Environmental Engineering Technology	Scaffolds/ High Elevation	Practical Application – Reinforcing	Carpentry Safety + Scaffolds/High Elevation

In the above example, Booth noted that the health sector is an industry that employs women whereas the precision production employs many men. In the health sector, the medical/clinical assistant job is normally filled by women of color who aren't paid a living wage.¹ As for the Heart Saver First Aid course in the furthestmost right column, she noted that students on this pathway managed to move up an economic rung because it's associated with a credential that employers value. Labor market data is crucial to identifying a career ladder for students and can clarify which courses provide the greatest return on investment to skills builders in given fields. In the precision production pathway, moving up an economic rung required two classes. Taking more courses was associated with better economic returns.

Overall, motivating students into longer-term pathways to high-quality credentials and associate degrees can lead to more economic mobility for them. However, the college should ensure that even short-term skills builder sequences lead to valuable economic outcomes for students.

4. Focusing on skills builders supports system wide initiatives.

Skills builders are an important student population for several efforts already underway in California Community Colleges:

- ◆ **Guided Pathways:** Identifying skills builder courses within program maps can help college professionals stack credentials in pathways and provide better on-ramps and off-ramps to lifelong learners.
- ◆ **Strong Workforce Program (SWP):** Your college could use SWP funds to recruit more students into high-value skills builder course sequences.
- ◆ **Student Equity Plans:** Understanding who your skills builders are may help to close equity gaps. College professionals should review enrollment patterns by race/ethnicity and age to see which student groups are benefitting from skills building and which students are not. This data can facilitate racial equity conversations about whether different student groups are equitably represented in course sequences with higher-economic gains.
- ◆ **Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education (REACH) Collaborative:** Developing short- and longer-term pathways for adult learners of color is a key strategy to improve student success and equity. Improving pathways for skills builders — and providing culturally responsive supports within pathways — is an important step to ensuring that students feel valued, connected and supported to achieve credentials that will improve their economic mobility.



¹To further explore how current enrollment patterns in short-term and long-term programs could reinforce patterns of occupational exclusion and economic inequity for students of color, please [view the “Creating Guided Pathways to Prosperity and Equity” brief](#) (log into the Vision Resource Center to see this resource in the Guided Pathways community).

ACTION TAKEAWAYS:

WHAT COLLEGES CAN DO

1. Use [LaunchBoard](#) to see data, labor market outcomes and trends where course pathways have strong economic outcomes for skills builders. Launchboard can also help you understand where additional coursework may not make sense for skills builders. Based on that data, more clearly communicate with students the economic value of continuing from a few classes to longer-term certificates to degrees. That will help students make informed decisions to assess whether the tradeoff of pursuing college is worth it.

Be proactive in informing skills builders about progress they have already made toward a certificate or program completion. For example, you can help a skill builder make the decision to move from an automotive to engineering pathway. Show them skills builders courses and earnings outcomes, short-term certificate courses, and increased earnings and additional stackable options that include certificates and associate degrees.

2. Identify students in skills builder courses at your institution. Use that information to support your outreach and recruitment efforts with students and to ensure that supports are culturally responsive to student needs. Learn how to do that in West Ed's guide "[Identifying Skills Builders and Estimating Economic Returns to Skills-Building Course Sequences: A Practice Guide](#)." By looking at institutional data, you can grow enrollment to find skill builders to engage for continuing education as well as inform students who have completed courses about opportunities for upskilling.

3. Use data to help see how skill builders course-taking fits in Guided Pathways maps and meta-majors to address adult learners' immediate employment needs and longer-term opportunities, such as preparing to transfer or upskilling after receiving a degree. Consider how different skills builders sequences align within each meta-major or program path, and look at data specific to their course sequences and pathways. The following are three key opportunities to get skills builders on a path:

- ◆ When students with low-wage jobs come in to take one or two courses, identify whether longer-term programs will be beneficial, recruit skills builders and help them navigate pathways.
- ◆ Recruit students who are close to receiving an associate degree and graduating soon for upskilling and reskilling.
- ◆ Find students who have a bachelor's degree in a technical field. Encourage graduates to come back to your community college to upskill. At the same time, work with employers to see in which areas students can upskill to be more competitive (e.g., biotech).

4. Make structural changes to better align course sequencing with pathways. As you identify classes that are popular with skills builders, consider how to articulate and build into microcredential, certificate and degree programs. You can also use the institutional data on classes students want to take to facilitate conversations with employers.



Please log into the [Vision Resource Center](#) before clicking links.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Explore skills builder data using [LaunchBoard Community College Pipeline](#).
- See West Ed’s instructions on [how to access skills builder data on LaunchBoard](#) (log into the Vision Resource Center to see this resource in the Guided Pathways community).
- To identify skills builder courses and who is attending them, see West Ed’s guide “[Identifying Skills Builders and Estimating Economic Returns to Skills-Building Course Sequences: A Practice Guide](#).”
- See more research on skills builders: Peter Riley Bahr, Yiran Chen & Rooney Columbus (2023) [Community College Skills Builders: Prevalence, Characteristics, Behaviors, and Outcomes of Successful Non-Completing Students Across Four States](#), The Journal of Higher Education, 94:1, 96-131, DOI: [10.1080/00221546.2022.2082782](#).
- Guided Pathways Institute 1 Brief: “[Creating Guided Pathways to Prosperity and Equity](#)” (log into the Vision Resource Center to see this resource in the Guided Pathways community).

The Success Center at the Foundation for California Community Colleges independently prepared this overview based on the presentation; the overview may not fully represent the presenters’ viewpoints.



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