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For Work-Force Training, a Plan to Give College Credit Where It's Due

By LIBBY SANDER

After nearly three years of planning, Ohio's higher-education officials are finalizing an ambitious program to grant college credit for some technical courses offered at the state's adult-education centers.

In doing so, the state could become a model for an approach to career and technical training that makes it easier for students to get the credentials necessary to compete in a skilled economy.

"This is a state that long ago recognized the need for technical education beyond high school, but didn't have as much of an emphasis on college," says Eric D. Fingerhut, chancellor of Ohio's Board of Regents. "So we have a very sophisticated technical-education network which, in this day and age, now needs to be put into more of a system that leads people into college."

The program is the latest in a string of state efforts to more closely link work-force training and postsecondary education, which had operated independently.

The new program, called the Career-Technical Credit Transfer, was born in 2005. That year the Legislature passed a law calling for the Ohio Board of Regents and the Ohio Department of Education to create policies that would allow students to transfer courses completed at technical centers to any higher-education institution in the state.

Now, with the program finally getting its legs, faculty members from technical centers and community colleges are evaluating courses that have been submitted as candidates for credit.

They are examining courses in five key work-force areas: automotive technology, computer networking, electrical and mechanical engineering technology, medical assisting, and nursing.

And if all goes as planned, officials say that by midsummer, Ohioans studying those subjects at adult-education centers could receive college credit for certain courses that they could later apply toward a degree.

"It's not at all about dumbing down the curriculum," says Julian L. Alssid, executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center, a think tank in New York that works closely with states looking to improve the quality of their work forces. "It's about getting people a foot in the door who might not have otherwise gotten to the postsecondary track."

Not all the courses offered at Ohio's technical centers will be eligible for the new program, nor should they be, Mr. Fingerhut says. But he believes students should receive credit for courses that have become almost identical to their credit-bearing counterparts at the state's community colleges.

"Many of these [technical] schools have become enormously sophisticated in the programs they offer, and their facilities have become more comprehensive and really, in many respects, indistinguishable from some of our technical programs at community colleges," Mr. Fingerhut says.

Given the similarities in many — but not all — of the curricula, he says, it made sense to link the courses to the community-college system. The result, he hopes, will be "another front door" to a college education in a state that desperately wants, and needs, to change the educational profile of its work force.

Pathways to College

Ohio's plan is a bold one, experts in work-force education say. But in a state with fading industry, it makes sense.

Once, people in Ohio could attend a vocational or technical center, get a factory job, and support their families, Mr. Alssid says, but "those days are going away." Ohio's plan would create "pathways" to a college degree and not treat vocational or technical training as an end unto itself, he says.

That route is not without its challenges.

There are accreditation matters to consider, making sure that the curricula of the technical courses meet the standards expected both by industry and by their credit-bearing siblings in the state's community colleges.

And there is the challenge of ensuring that credits from a technical center in, say, Toledo can transfer to a community college in Cincinnati, much the same way that community-college credits are transferable to four-year institutions around the state.

Mr. Fingerhut says Ohio's existing infrastructure for transferring credits from community colleges to four-year institutions makes it easier for officials to design a similar system for vocational and technical credits.

A Broader Debate

Ohio's move reflects the experience of many states that face shifting economies and a shrinking pool of jobs for workers without college credentials.

Educators in those places are looking for ways to provide students greater access to credit-bearing courses and, ultimately, greater career potential.

They can no longer afford for adult students to get lost in a "hidden college," where they move through at a fast clip to receive training and quickly return to the work force without getting any closer to a degree.

The Ohio program could reveal more about those students who come and go in career and technical programs.

"We're much better at tracking credit course hours than noncredit, so this could be something that would also enable us to track the essential data on student success in these programs," says Brian Pusser, an associate professor of education at the University of Virginia.

And since credit-bearing courses are generally accompanied by student aid, the program could increase the amount of money available to students over time, he says.

But perhaps most important, Mr. Pusser and Mr. Alssid say, are the intangibles.

"It is such a challenge to go back to school," Mr. Pusser says. "When someone gets that inspiration and says, 'I want to be a nurse,' it's got to be a very tough moment when they've already been there for a semester or two and find out they essentially don't have any credit toward a degree. This could be a powerful measure."

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