

How Florida Community and Technical Colleges Are Aligning CTE Programming to the Labor Market in a Post-COVID Era

Jenna Terrell, Diana Roldan-Rueda, Angela Estacion, Hayley Spencer, and Cameron Sublett

The COVID-19 pandemic created a historic, global disruption in the labor market. In the short term, the labor force participation rate dropped precipitously as workers were laid off or furloughed, especially in sectors that were most affected by social distancing protocols, such as hospitality, travel and leisure, and retail (Lund et al., 2021). While the labor market has rebounded since 2020, the pandemic has reshaped the future of work for America. Meanwhile, community and technical colleges around the country are responding to low levels of student enrollment after the pandemic (Barrington, 2022). These institutions are often tasked with filling the skills gap in their local economies through career and technical education (CTE) programs. Furthermore, community and technical colleges are increasingly being held accountable, through state and federal policy, for ensuring that the programs and credentials that they offer are relevant to the skills demanded by the labor market.

This brief describes findings from a statewide survey in Florida that sheds light on how community and technical colleges are examining student and economic data, creating processes for program review and market alignment, engaging industries and businesses, and supporting student success in CTE after the pandemic.

Background

In partnership with the Florida Department of Education, WestEd developed a statewide survey of community and technical colleges to better understand the processes and practices that they use to ensure that CTE programs of

Post-pandemic, community colleges are pivotal in reshaping America's workforce by addressing the skills gap through CTE programs.

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study are aligned to the local labor markets. Federal and state policymakers are increasingly unified around the goal of encouraging students to pursue market-aligned CTE programs (Blissett, 2020). At the federal level, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century (Perkins V) Act now includes a requirement that eligible education agencies complete a Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) every two years in order to, among other purposes, verify that CTE “programs of study are aligned to and validated by local workforce needs and economic priorities” (Advance CTE, 2019, para. 1). Little is known about the ways in which community and technical colleges implement policies and practices to help ensure that programs of study are market aligned and that students are supported in obtaining high-wage, high-skill jobs that support economic mobility.

Survey Development

WestEd developed a statewide survey in order to fill the gap in knowledge about market-aligned CTE programs and processes. The survey was informed by the Aspen Institute’s *The Workforce Playbook: A Community College Guide to Delivering Excellent Career and Technical Education* (Davidson et al., 2019). The survey questions were derived from the indicators for each of the four domains outlined in *The Workforce Playbook*:



**ADVANCE
A VISION**



**DELIVER HIGH-QUALITY
PROGRAMS**



**SUPPORT
STUDENTS**



**DEVELOP EMPLOYER
PARTNERSHIPS**

WestEd administered the survey at 28 state colleges in the Florida College System (FCS)¹ and 50 district technical colleges (DTCs) in the Florida District Technical College system in fall 2022. The survey received response rates of 71% from the FCS institutions and 66% from DTCs.

How are institutions advancing a vision for talent development and economic mobility and delivering high-quality programs aligned with regional needs?

A critical aspect of an institution's ability to develop its students' talents and skills and promote greater economic mobility is its ability to review labor market information and align its programming to labor market demand. This process ensures that the degrees and credentials that the institution offers are relevant to labor market needs. Institutions that responded to the survey—both state colleges and DTCs—reported that they have well-designed processes to ensure that students have access to relevant, market-aligned jobs, including formal processes for closing and/or redefining CTE programs because of poor student outcomes or lack of demand. Both types of institutions also reported that they conduct annual program reviews to carry out these processes, in addition to the federal CLNA process and the statewide audit that the Florida Department of Education implemented in 2020. They also reported using information gained from these processes to align programs with community needs, target special populations, and make data-driven decisions regarding program offerings, marketing, and recruitment efforts.

Both types of institutions also reported that they use multiple data sources to access labor market information to monitor labor market demand (see Figure 1). In particular, institutions reported that they access and use labor market information through Florida's statewide and regional occupational demand lists, which are curated and disseminated through Florida's Department of Economic Opportunity. Some institutions also use sophisticated vendor-sourced data through vendors such as Burning Glass (formerly Lightcast and EMSI). Most institutions also reported that they use some type of labor market information in parallel with administrative data from their institution, such as student enrollment and completion data, during the program review process. Decisions about program expansion or closure, targeted recruitment, and student support services are based on student enrollment and completion data, disaggregated by CTE program. Institutions reported that they also use data to determine strategies for better retention and success among demographic populations with low program completion rates (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. How often does your institution consider the following elements in its processes to review and refine the mix of CTE programs offered at your institution?

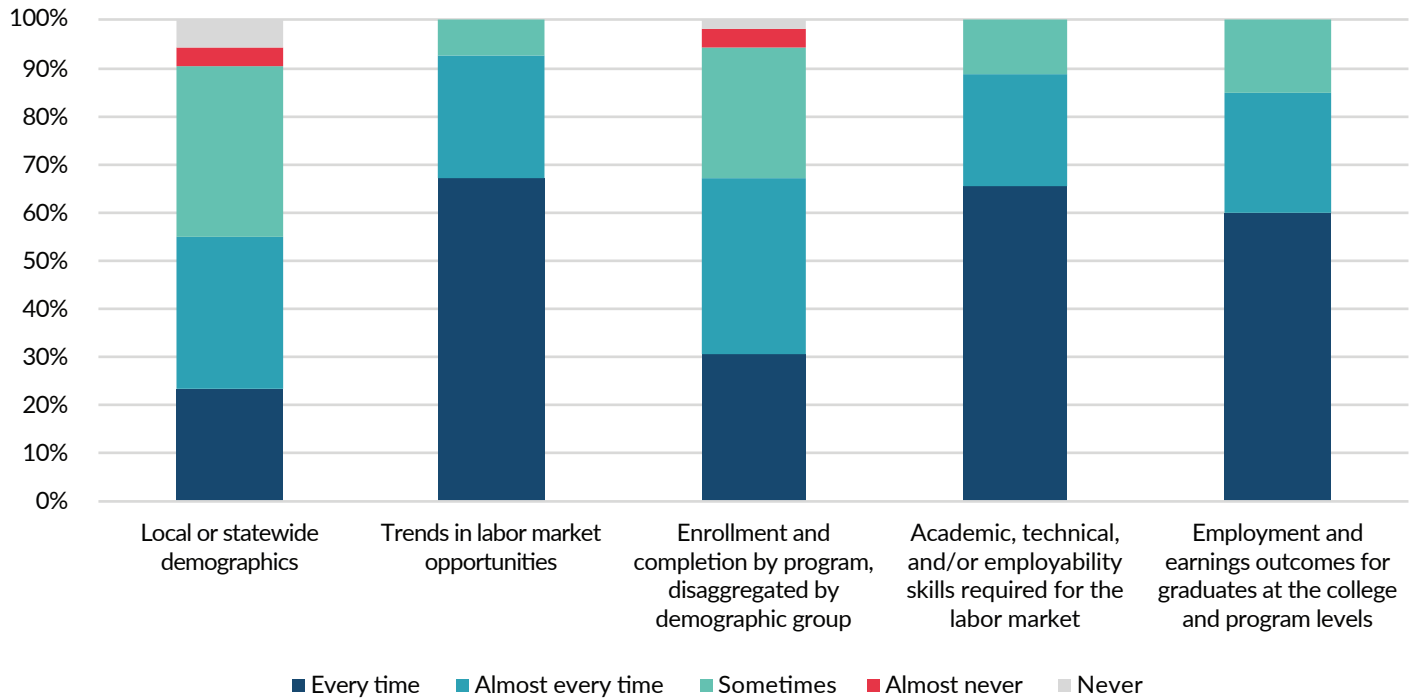
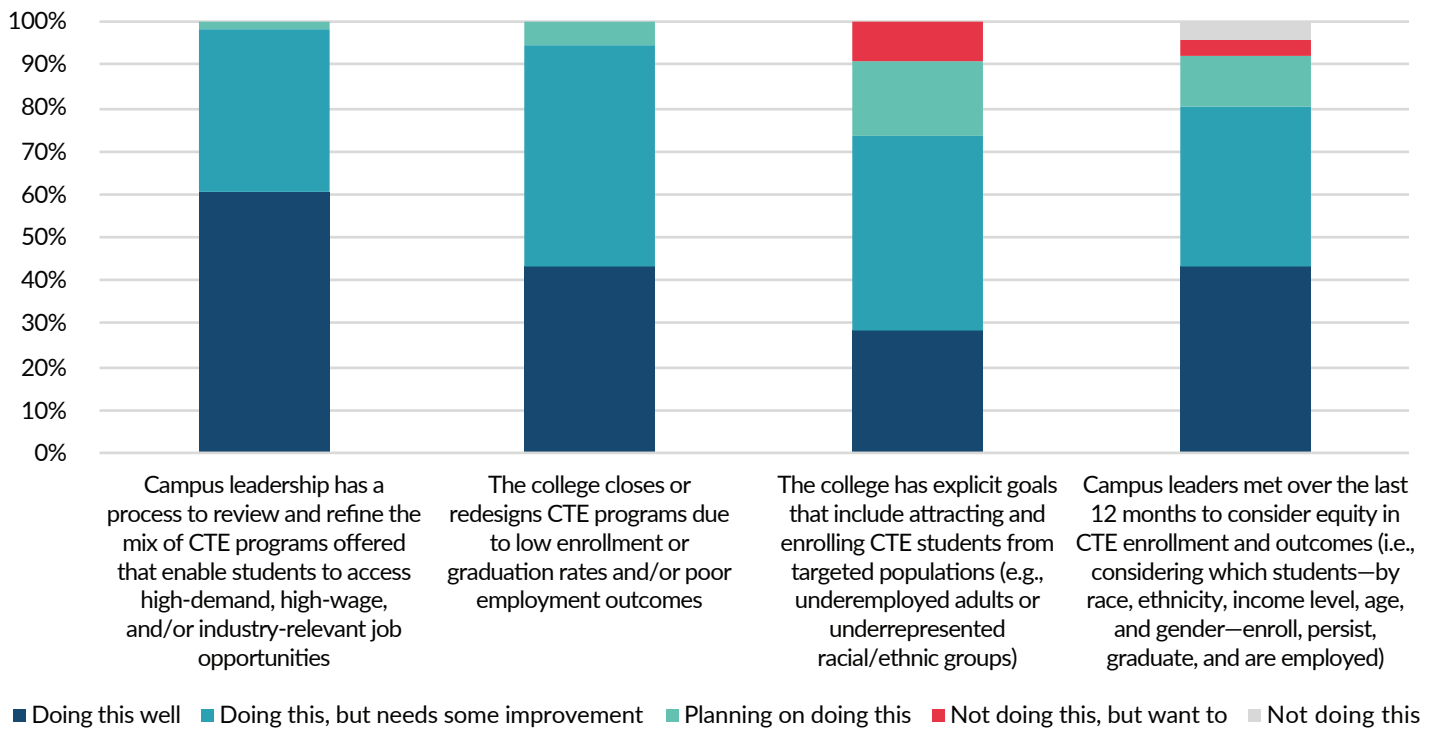


Figure 2. To what degree does your institution have and/or do the following?

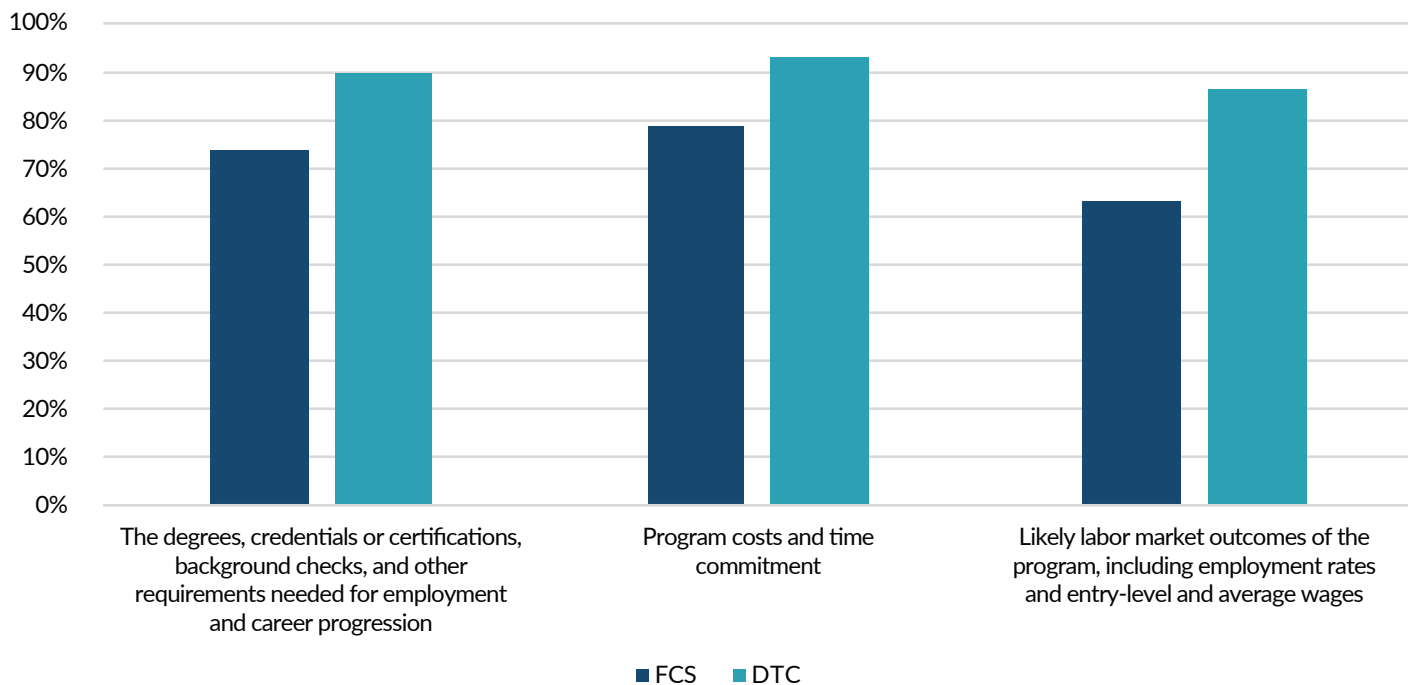


How are institutions taking intentional action to support students?

Student supports may have substantial influence on student experiences and success. Supports can help ensure that employment opportunities reach all students. The survey included questions about the presence of supports, both institution-wide and within each CTE cluster. Overall, FCS institutions reported that their advisors are trained to understand programs with the strongest labor market returns and that they are also trained to understand disparities in participation by special populations (see Figure 3). For example, some of these institutions indicated that advisors are trained on how to use labor market data. Several mentioned that advisors are provided with professional development, such as conferences, consortium meetings, or other external training opportunities with a focus on understanding industry and labor market trends and information. A few institutions mentioned that advisors are encouraged or invited to attend regular advisory board meetings with employers to understand labor market needs:

CTE advisors meet with deans, collegewide chairs, program managers, and faculty to gain a better understanding of specific programs and curriculum as well as labor market demand. Advisors are also invited to program reviews and industry advisory committee meetings.

Figure 3. Percentages of institutions where faculty and staff reported they always provide prospective students with the following information



How are institutions developing responsive employer partnerships?

Both types of institutions reported that they have routine ways of understanding employers' perspectives and are likely to have dedicated CTE personnel to manage employer and industry relationships. Institutions reported that they engage several community and regional organizations to provide information to prospective CTE students. Several institutions mentioned the regional or local CareerSource Florida organizations,² local chambers of commerce, vocational rehabilitation offices, and local economic or workforce development boards as partners in their outreach to prospective students. Additionally, institutions mentioned outreach events within their community and in K-12 schools as opportunities to recruit students to in-demand CTE programs. Institutions also reported that they work with the advisory boards of community-based organizations, which review and help to develop CTE programs. Several colleges said that they hold biannual review processes for programs during advisory board meetings in which local industry and business partners are members.

Next Steps

Preliminary survey data from our study suggest that, in Florida, state and technical colleges have developed processes to deliver high-quality CTE programs. Whether and how these practices have been developed and refined and which CTE programs have been most affected by the pandemic are unclear. In the next phase of our study, WestEd will merge Florida labor market data and student outcome data to better understand enrollment and labor market patterns. We will also conduct case studies of a sample of institutions in 2023 to better understand how the pandemic has informed their processes and practices for market-aligned CTE programs in community and technical colleges.

Endnotes

1. Florida refers to its 28 colleges as state colleges rather than community colleges. These colleges all grant baccalaureate degrees and are categorized as “primarily associate degree granting baccalaureate” institutions by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2023).
2. CareerSource Florida includes statewide workforce boards of business and government leaders charged with guiding workforce development for the state of Florida.

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For more information about the ARCC Network, visit ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/arccnetwork/

For more information on the Florida CTE project, visit wested.org/project/sub-baccalaureate-career-and-technical-education/

Jenna Terrell, Diana Roldan-Rueda, Angela Estacion, and Hayley Spencer are researchers at WestEd. Cameron Sublett is a researcher at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.