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How Community Colleges Use Job-Market Data to Develop New Programs

By Arielle Martinez | JUNE 15, 2016

As sites of work-force development, community colleges must be responsive to the demands of the rapidly changing job market. Now, many community-college systems are turning to job-market data that are more up to date and more precise than ever before.

In Floyd County, Ky., which had an unemployment rate of 10.5 percent in April 2016, Big

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Sandy Community and Technical College recently started a new associate-degree program in broadband technology, the first of its kind in the state, with the hope that its graduates will land high-demand jobs in the region.

The Kentucky Community and Technical College system, of which Big Sandy is part, is using data gathered from online job listings to develop more programs geared toward getting students ready for the work force. The data are collected by the job-market-analytics company Burning Glass Technologies, which says it does a daily digital scan of some three million job openings on 40,000 job-listing websites to gauge the demand for specific skills and credentials.

"It’s been incredibly helpful looking at the economic vitality of our state," says Rhonda Tracy, the system's chancellor.

The system has been working with Burning Glass for about five years, and the real-time data are more current and detailed than data offered by the federal government, according to Alicia Crouch, the system’s vice chancellor for research and analysis.

"National data often looks at past trends, and we’re thinking about the future," Ms. Crouch says.

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The U.S. Department of Labor organizes its data into broad occupational categories, whereas online job listings can be organized into more-specific categories based on the skills that employers are looking for.

"The federal government might have data on the demand for ‘computer programmers,’ but you might know from your friends in IT that ‘computer programmer’ is not a very helpful term," says Matthew Sigelman, chief executive of Burning Glass. "Are employers looking for programmers in Java or .NET or C#? That’s what we’re looking for."

Kentucky’s community-college system uses the job-market data to justify all new program development, says Ms. Tracy. Just last week the system’s Board of Regents approved new associate-degree programs in electrical technology, physical therapy, and radiography.

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The system has also teamed up with Kentucky's Education and Workforce Development Cabinet to bring insights from the Burning Glass data to employment offices in order to determine what educational opportunities the system can provide for job seekers, Ms. Crouch says.

The community-college system uses enrollment numbers rather than job-market data to make decisions about which programs to suspend, says Ms. Tracy.

"We're looking at the sustainability of programs and the cost to run some of our programs," she adds. "And if we don't have sufficient enrollment, that impacts the decision to continue or suspend the program."

Data to Aid Decisions

Kentucky is not the only state with a community-college system that is exploring new ways of collecting job-market data. Linda Weiner, vice president for engagement and strategic innovation at the North Carolina Community College system, says that many colleges in that system are using services such as Burning Glass, Emsi, and Chmura Economics & Analytics.

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David Baime, senior vice president for government relations and policy analysis at the American Association of Community Colleges, says that in addition to looking at job-market data, community colleges across the country are increasingly considering data on the wages of their programs' graduates.

"With the process of determining where to spend limited work-force-training dollars and what programs to offer that will benefit students and the community," Mr. Baime says, "I think that being faster in collecting data will help colleges make these difficult decisions."

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