

A photograph of two male workers in a factory setting. They are wearing blue coveralls, white hard hats, and safety glasses. The worker on the left is holding a tablet computer, and both are looking at the screen. The background shows industrial machinery, including a large vertical lathe or mill. A white circular graphic is overlaid in the top right corner.

Education
Design Lab

BRIDGES Rural Design Insights

PART 2: Designing + Piloting a New Approach to Economic Agility in Rural Communities

Design Insights — an Education Design Lab publication series

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ABOUT THE EDUCATION DESIGN LAB AND DESIGN INSIGHTS PUBLICATION SERIES

The Education Design Lab (Lab) is a national nonprofit that co-designs, prototypes, and tests education-to-workforce models through a human-centered design process focused on understanding learners' experiences, addressing equity gaps in higher education, and connecting learners to economic mobility. The Lab believes human-centered design allows colleges and universities to map and galvanize their existing strengths to meet the needs of the students they serve. The Lab's process also shows higher education leaders how to consider the needs of employers, using the curriculum and program design as a gateway to make skills more visible to students and employers alike.

Design Insights is a publication series designed to share insights from initiatives led and supported by the Lab as part of the Learner Revolution, which is about changing the future of learning and work in response to the needs of learners, workers, and the evolving labor market. The future of education, training, and work lies with new majority learner-earners, who include parent learners, students of color, first-generation students, low-income students, and communities long underinvested in, around whom the Lab is orienting our work through our Learner Engagement Framework.



Introduction

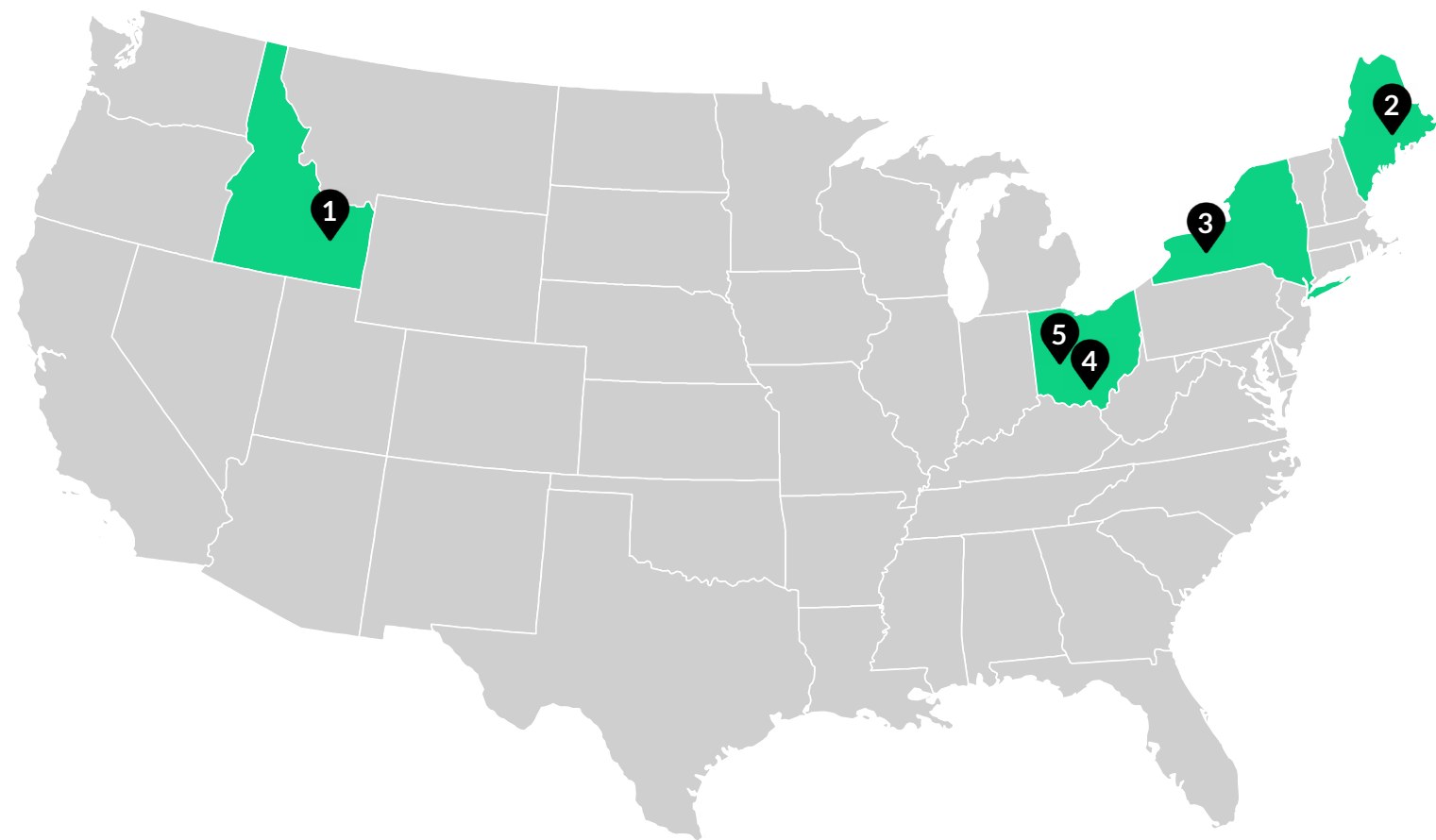
A rural revival is happening across America. That's because rural communities have so much to offer, from a renewed focus on access to affordable, reliable broadband; to an increase in remote job opportunities; and, last but not least, access to gorgeous landscapes and scenery that cannot be paralleled.

Despite their assets, there is a great deal of investment and attention still needed to help rural communities realize their full potential, and we believe community colleges have a role to play.

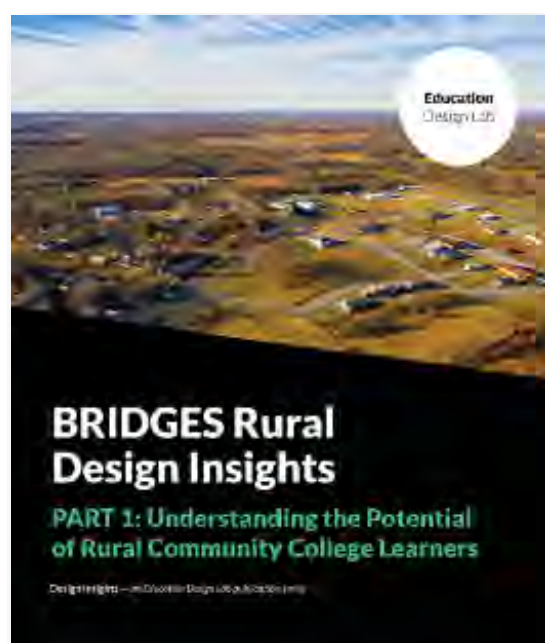
However, [educational attainment](#) for adults in rural communities is lower compared to urban areas, and rural counties with lower educational attainment tend to have [higher unemployment and poverty rates](#). The future of training and work continues to shift toward a more [skills-based economy](#), meanwhile family-sustaining careers are changing rapidly in rural areas, requiring learners, institutions, and employers to be flexible in navigating these challenges. The median earnings of rural workers is currently only [80 percent](#) of their urban counterparts. Wage gaps by gender exist in rural places, at every level of education.

That's why the Lab launched BRIDGES Rural, an initiative supported by Ascendium Education Group aimed at strengthening the capacity of rural community colleges to serve as critical economic growth engines for their learners and communities. The five schools selected to join a community of practice to design and launch pilot programs are:

1. **College of Eastern Idaho**
Idaho Falls, ID
2. **Eastern Maine Community College**
Bangor, ME
3. **Finger Lakes Community College**
Canadaigua, NY
4. **Washington State Community College**
Marietta, OH
5. **Zane State College**
Zanesville, OH



This Insights Brief is Part 2 in the BRIDGES Rural story that builds upon early learnings from the Understand phase, presents the newly designed pilots, shares key design tools used along the way, and finally, it offers a set of insights to consider for future work. Part 1 of the BRIDGES Rural Design Insights Brief (published summer 2021) introduced the design challenge and made the case for greater investment in rural community colleges. It explored key barriers and opportunities in rural communities and offered early insights used to inform the development of new models for rural colleges. We explained how our approach, based in human-centered design, helps rural community colleges better respond to their regional labor markets and enable greater economic mobility for their learners and communities.



The first publication for this project, [BRIDGES Rural, Part 1: Understanding the Potential of Rural Community College Learners](#), explored key barriers and opportunities in rural communities, and offered early insights from the project that was used to inform the development of new models for rural colleges.

Overview of BRIDGES Rural

Throughout the design process, BRIDGES Rural has developed a clear theory of change that articulates how this design challenge has the potential to contribute to the long-term outcome of building rural community college capacity to serve as engines of growth for their learners and communities. We believe participating colleges will not only develop new economic mobility pilots, but in doing so, they will increase their knowledge, skills, awareness, and understanding around developing economic opportunities in rural areas.

In addition to directly impacting learners who participate in the pilots, community colleges will apply the knowledge and skills they learn (including design thinking and learner-centering skills) to create broader institutional change, such as the increased ability to support the goals of learners from across the community. We believe these institutional changes, alongside scalable pilot programs, will lead to economic growth in these local communities, especially benefitting historically underinvested learners and community members in rural areas.



Photo: Courtesy of Eastern Maine Community College

Human-Centered Design

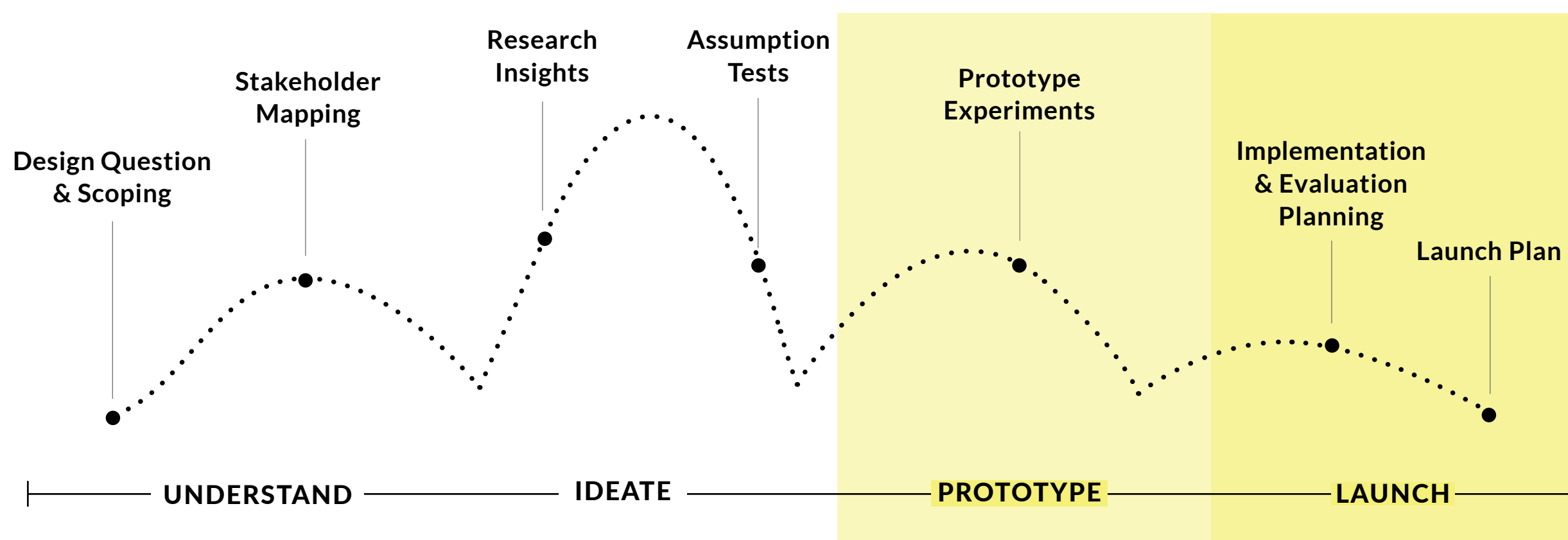
The BRIDGES Rural Design Challenge follows the Lab’s model of human-centered design that consists of four phases: Understand, Ideate, Prototype, and Launch. All of the Lab’s design work starts with a critical design question that guides the process.

For BRIDGES Rural, the question is:

“How might we strengthen the capacity of rural community colleges to serve as critical economic growth engines for their learners and communities?”

The first publication for this project, [BRIDGES Rural, Part 1: Understanding the Potential of Rural Community College Learners](#), discusses the Understand and Ideate phases. The last two phases of the process explained in this brief are about taking ideas and putting them into testable prototypes that can be further understood and iterated on by the learners and community colleges before launching pilots.

THE LAB’S DESIGN PROCESS



The goal of the Prototype phase is to test design criteria and gather critical feedback from stakeholders that can inform continued iteration in the journey toward designing and launching a pilot. As the BRIDGES Rural cohort teams created their prototypes, they also identified key stakeholders for testing and iteration that included employers.

Design Criteria

“Design criteria” represent the criteria or aspirations each prototype or pilot should meet. The institutions use that criteria to evaluate each prototype to ensure they meet learner needs.

The Lab’s universal design criteria focuses on making learning and skills visible, portable, affordable, flexible, and relevant.

This reflects the Lab’s years of experience working with [new majority learners](#), employers, and institutions to design education toward the future of work.

“

Human-centered design has really allowed us as an institution to step back, take some time, and trust the process, as well as get feedback from all stakeholders, including our students because they are our stakeholders, to help us make solid decisions in our pilot moving forward. We are feeling really confident in our pilot because we have taken the steps along the way. And we are now having conversations about other projects at our institution and how we can use human-centered design in all of our projects so we can be more intentional in the design of those ideas as well.

TRACEY PORTER
Associate Dean of Workforce Development
Zane State College





The Lab's learner engagement framework, articulated in our 2021 publication, [“Walk in My Shoes”: An Actionable Learner Engagement Framework to Foster Growth, Belonging, and Agency](#), was used to help BRIDGES Rural colleges shape their prototypes.

As the BRIDGES Rural cohort teams tested their initial ideas and concepts with the Lab's universal design criteria and the Learner Engagement Framework, they established the below design criteria to shape the development of their new prototypes.

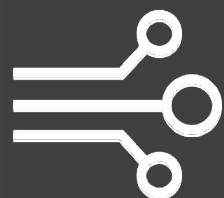
BRIDGES RURAL DESIGN CRITERIA



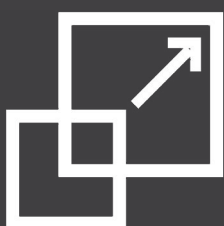
Increase access to employment opportunities with living wages.



Address learner needs, including their sense of growth, belonging, and agency.



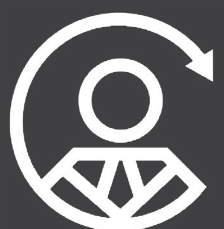
Enable institutions to develop stronger partnerships with employers and community-based organizations.



Create models that are sustainable and scalable.



Impact learners of focus who have been systematically underinvested in and underserved.



Make learners and their learning more visible to potential employers.

LAB TOOL HIGHLIGHT: STORYBOARDS

BRIDGES Rural colleges created storyboards to bring their prototypes to life. These storyboards represented the learner's journey in a chronological sequence of activities, from their first inquiry about possible options at the community college through finding employment. These storyboards were then brought to life by the BRIDGES Rural team and translated into short videos that each team shared with their learners and stakeholders to gather additional feedback on their ideas. Insights and feedback from these prototypes aided in the eventual design of each college's pilot.

The design teams worked through the process, with accompanying tools like storyboards, to develop responsive innovative pilots that met the design criteria and launched at the start of 2022.

EMCC PROTOTYPING STORYBOARD



WSCC PROTOTYPING STORYBOARD



EMCC PROTOTYPING STORYBOARD



FLCC PROTOTYPING STORYBOARD



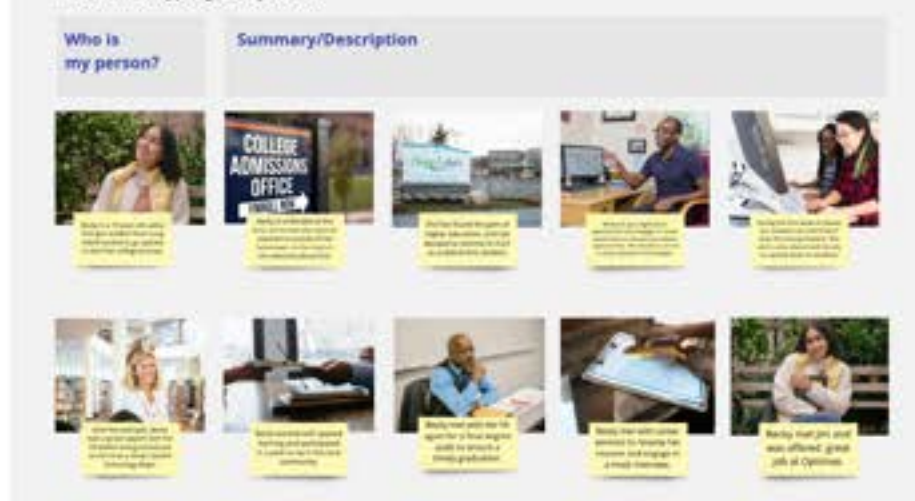
FLCC PROTOTYPING STORYBOARD



CEI PROTOTYPING STORYBOARD



FLCC Prototyping Storyboard



FINGER LAKES COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROTOTYPING STORYBOARD

Prototype Name

Who is my person?

Summary/Description

Provide a dedicated mentor/coach/advisor throughout a student's experience at FLCC (before, during, after completion)



Becky, 25, is a first-gen Latina student from Wayne County who is excited to start her college journey after working in agriculture for several years.



Becky is undecided but wants to build a career in financial services. "I think I'd like an office job. I am going to apply as a Liberal Arts student. I heard that's best when someone's undecided."



Becky receives her acceptance letter to Liberal Arts and Sciences at FLCC.



Within 48 hours, Becky hears from her Professional Advisor (PA), who will be her advocate throughout her college journey. They explore potential job opportunities. Based on her experience and goals, she decides to enroll in Smart Systems Technologies.



Becky builds a great rapport with her PA before being introduced to her Faculty Advisor (FA) as a Smart Systems Technology major. Through periodic check-ins with her PA, she confirms this program is a good fit.



After her first year, Becky participates in a paid co-op in the local community, applying what she has learned.



During her third semester, Becky's mom experiences some medical issues and is unable to provide child care for Becky's siblings. Becky is not sure if she can support her family take on child care while continuing school.



Before taking a semester off, Becky reaches out to her PA to discuss college and community resources. She realizes she can continue full-time while balancing child care by taking online courses.



During her last semester, Becky meets with her FA for a final degree audit to ensure timely graduation. Thanks to the work she has done and her strong relationship with her advocate, she is on track!



Even though Becky's co-op sponsor wants to hire her upon graduation, the PA refers her to career services to revamp her resume and engage in a mock interview to keep her options open.



Becky graduates from FLCC and starts on a career path at Optimax.

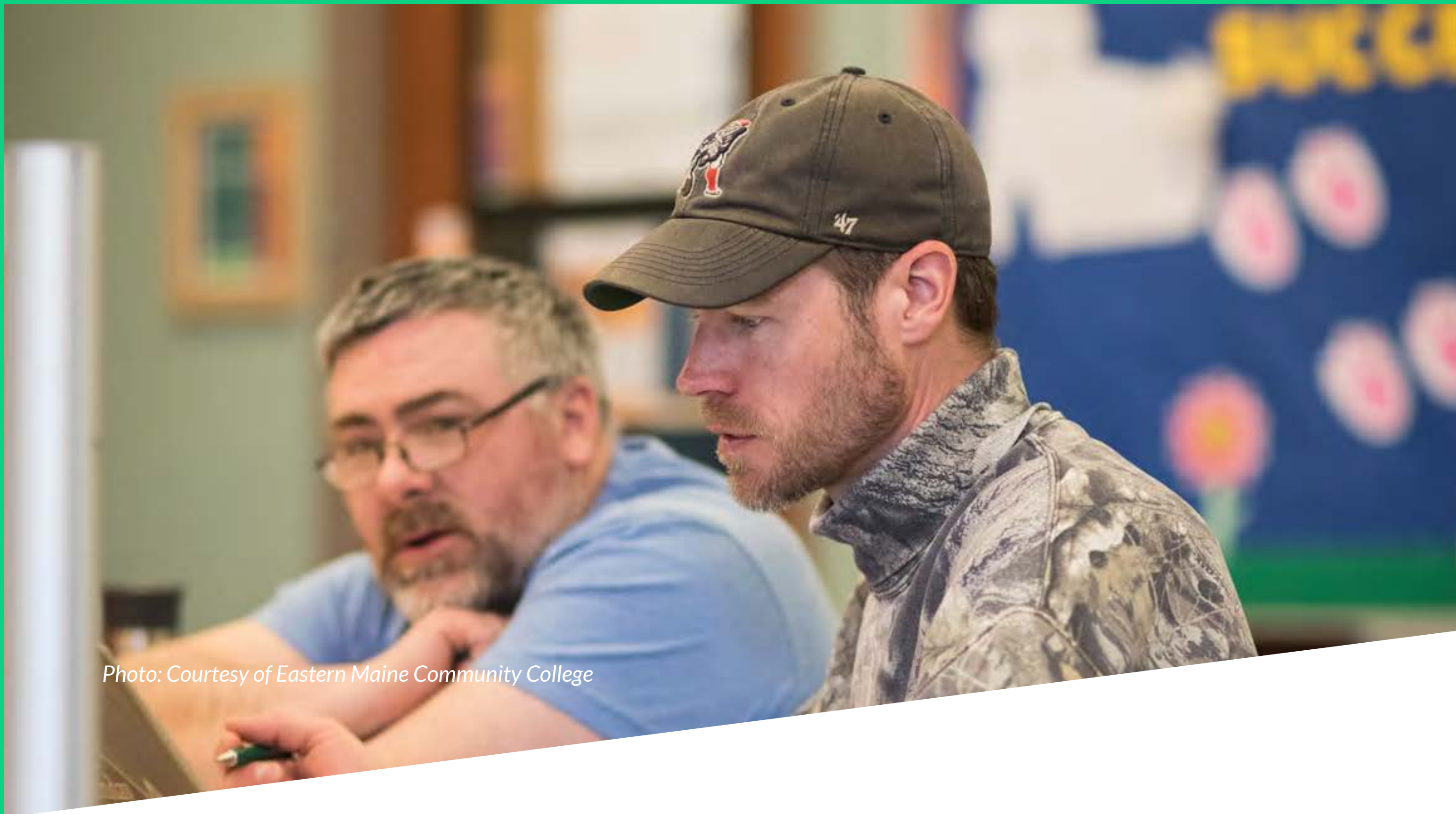


Photo: Courtesy of Eastern Maine Community College

BRIDGES Rural Community College Pilots

Five community college design teams worked through the Lab's process to develop pilots specific to the needs of their rural learners. All five of these pilots aim to strengthen the capacity of rural community colleges to serve as critical engines for regional economic growth and expand opportunities for learners. In addition to the tools and resources provided by the Lab, each institution was awarded a \$50,000 incentive grant to aid with pilot implementation.

Finger Lakes Community College

PILOT: Growing Rural Infrastructure Together (GRIT)

About Finger Lakes Community College

Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC) serves diverse communities within the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. In addition to their main Canandaigua campus, FLCC provides studying and training opportunities at three campus centers. In total, FLCC enrolls an average of 5,000 learners each year. As they learned more about the many different rural micro-communities in their service region, the FLCC team saw the need to connect more deeply with people in these areas to support them finding a broader variety of job opportunities with higher wages and seeing FLCC as a place to go for skill-building throughout their careers.

8

locations

5,000

annual enrolled
learners



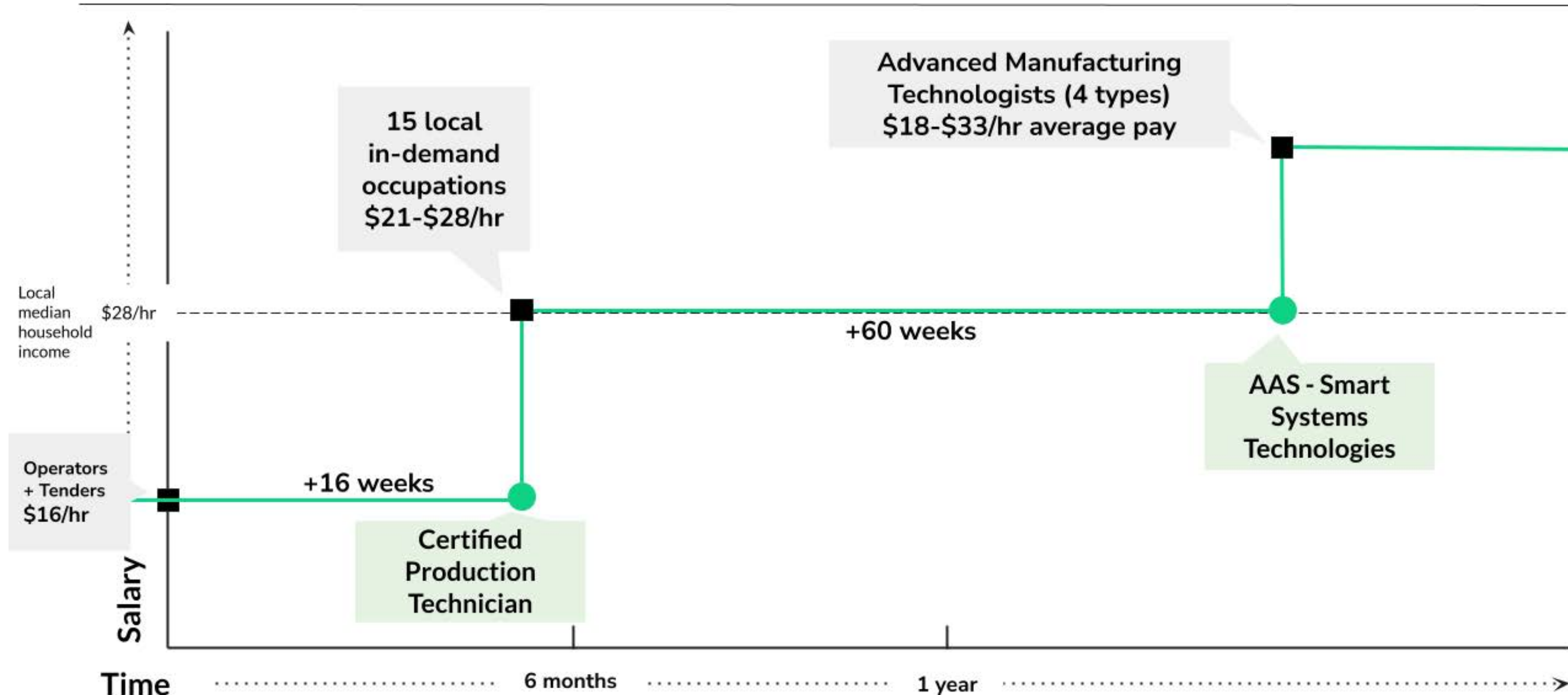
Pilot Overview

GRIT offers industry-driven micro-pathways that provide learners with opportunity, access, and advancement to earn in-demand credentials and secure living-wage jobs.

The first pilot micro-pathway is in advanced manufacturing, starting with a Certified Production Technician (CPT) credential, provided by FLCC and the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council, and leading to an AAS in Smart Systems Technology. The CPT credential alone makes learners eligible for roles in 15 growing occupations with many advancement opportunities. Focused on ensuring flexibility for their learners, the entire CPT credential can be completed in 16 weeks, with classes on Tuesday and Thursday evenings and one Saturday per month. Learners can

attend class in person or at home if a computer and broadband internet access is available. Learners are also eligible for grants that cover tuition, as well as all fees, textbooks, and materials. To promote learners' sense of belonging, GRIT provides each student with individualized support from a dedicated coach starting with enrollment through program completion and job preparation. This program will connect students with employers through methods that have historically led to job placement rates of over 95 percent for FLCC students in advanced manufacturing. FLCC will welcome employers as guest speakers throughout the program, the coach will support learners throughout the job application process, and FLCC will directly connect learners with employers who are hiring.

FLCC Advanced Manufacturing Pathway



Learners of Focus

- + Single parents
- + Young adults in jobs that do not have a positive outlook
- + Older career changers
- + Other new majority learners

Connection to inclusive local economic growth

The project has begun in two rural villages in the region, Bloomfield and Penn Yan, which were selected because of interest from multiple manufacturing employers throughout the region. Upon completion of this program, community members will be matched with local employers and will continue to have access to additional training and opportunities.

“

I'm excited about our pilot because of its ability to launch small, scale and adapt as needed, and have universal applicability to all of FLCC's programs and geographically as well.”

TODD SLOANE
Director of Workforce and Career Solutions
Finger Lakes Community College





Washington State Community College

PILOT: Strive for Five

About Washington State Community College

Washington State Community College (WSCC) is a two-year college in the Mid-Ohio Valley located on the Ohio and West Virginia border in Marietta, OH. Serving over 2,500 students, WSCC offers more than 40 certificate and associate degree programs to help learners transition from high school to college, as well as those impacted by the ever-changing economy and workforce landscape. The college has a large number of students who are part of Ohio's College Credit Plus program. In order to support underemployed and unemployed people in their region, WSCC has worked throughout BRIDGES to focus on increasing the enrollment and program completion of adult learners, especially parents.

2,500

students

40

annual enrolled
learners

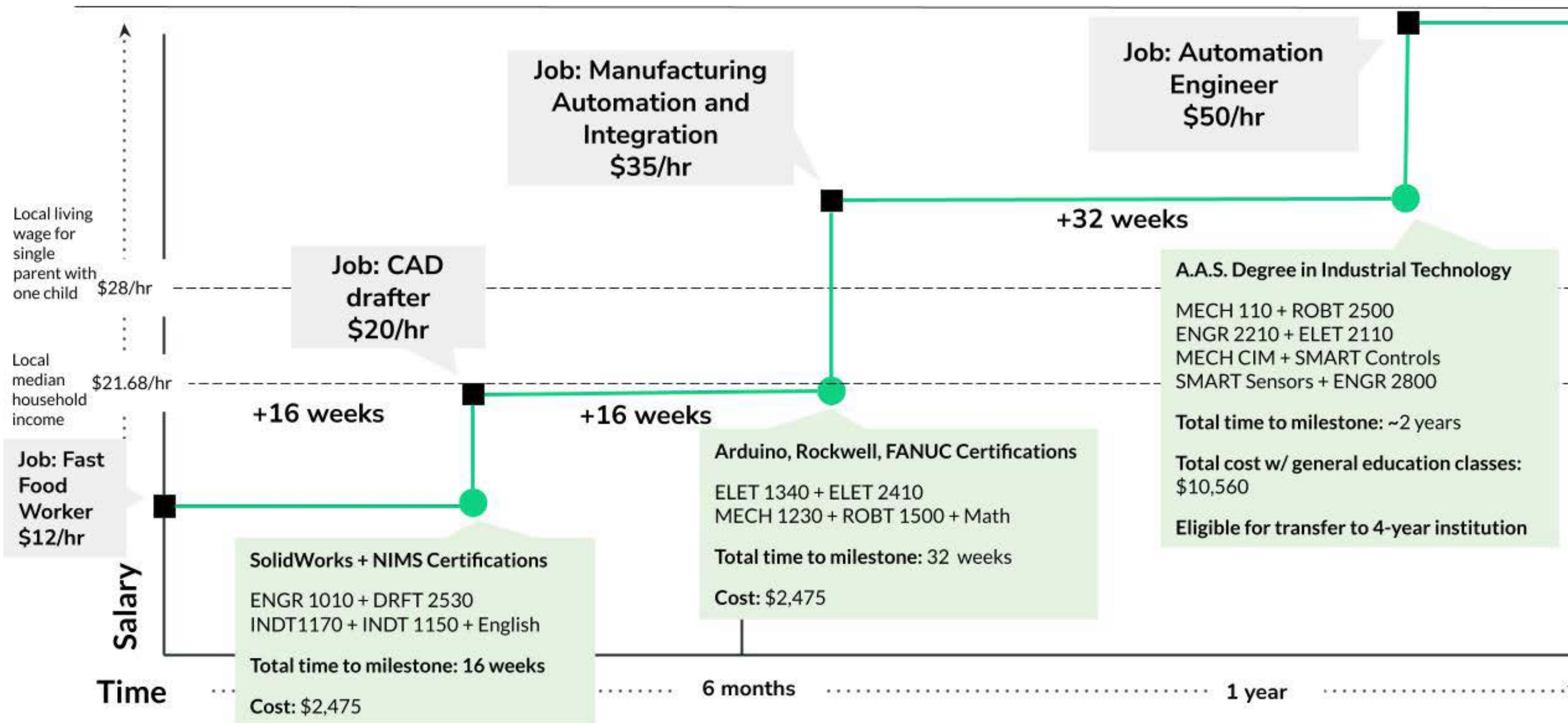


Pilot Overview

Strive for Five supports learners feeling a sense of belonging at WSCC through strong connection to a cohort and a success coach.

WSCC will provide access to free child care; gas cards to offset transportation costs; and tuition, books, and all fees will be covered during their first semester. To support their career advancement, learners will have access to stackable credential pathways where they can earn industry-recognized credentials such as SolidWorks and NIMS certifications that can stack to degrees, starting with a pathway in advanced manufacturing and integration. Each step in the pathway opens up new job prospects and wage increases.

WSCC Advanced Manufacturing + Integration Pathway



Learners of Focus

Adult learners in the Mid-Ohio Valley who are:

- + unemployed or underemployed,
- + have children
- + have low incomes, and/or
- + are first-generation college students

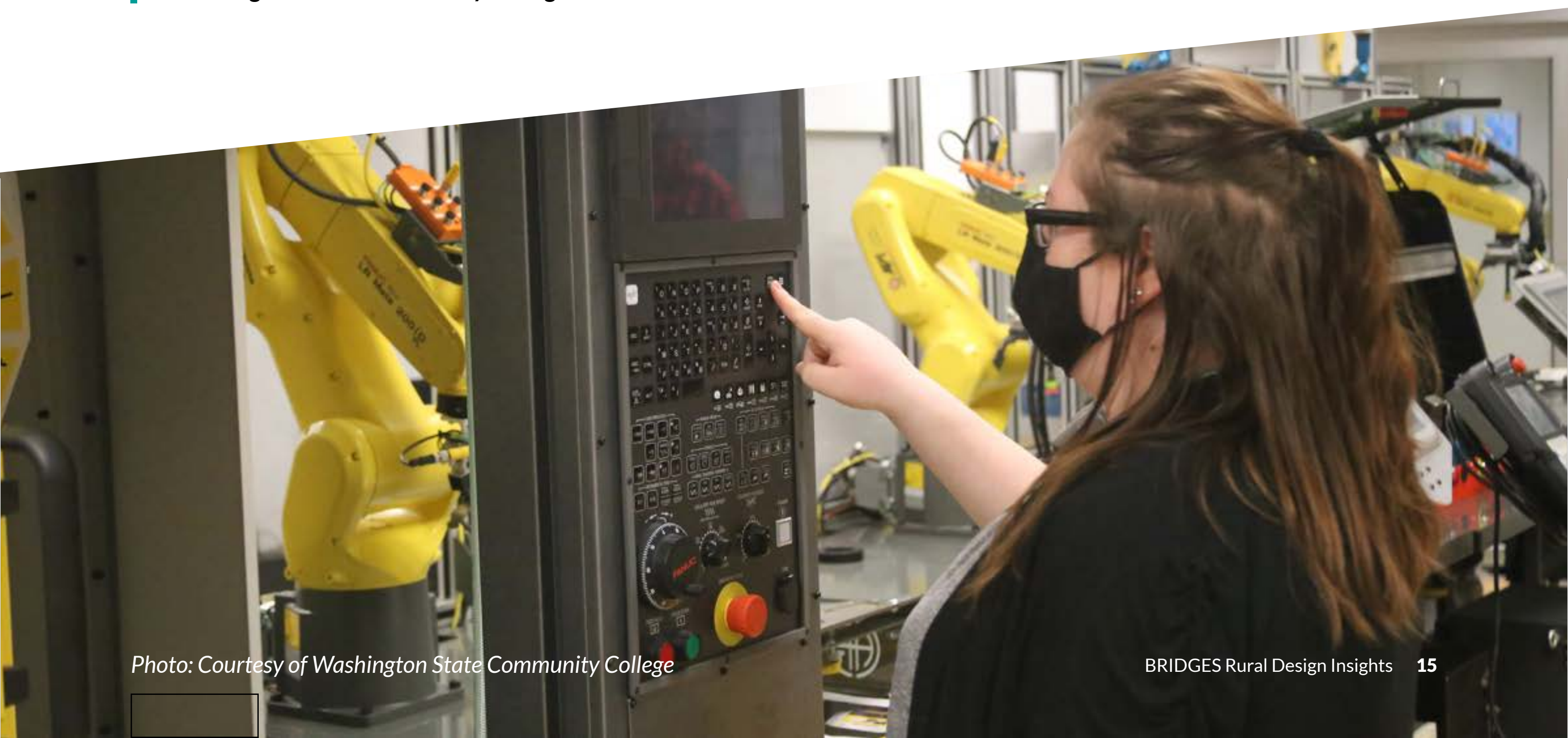
Connection to inclusive local economic growth

This pilot can broaden the diversity of family-sustaining career opportunities for people who want to remain local and increase the number of industry-prepared employees in the area. Building industry awareness of technical training and credentials available at WSCC can strengthen these partnerships and draw more employers to the area.

“

It's really important for us to consider the whole learner and not just how we make sure they understand these skills and acquire these competencies so they can get this job. A lot of students in our area have been told for so long that they're not college material and the classroom is not a place where they belong, and they've believed it. So changing those mentalities and making people feel welcome no matter who they are or where they're from has been a really important part of this process.

SARAH PARKER
Vice President of Academic Affairs
Washington State Community College



Zane State College

PILOT: Earn + Learn

About Zane State College

Zane State College (ZSC) has served Zanesville, OH, and the Mid-Ohio Valley for over 50 years. With a total enrollment of just over 2,000, Zane State serves a large number of students through Ohio's College Credit Plus program, which provides free college courses to high school students.

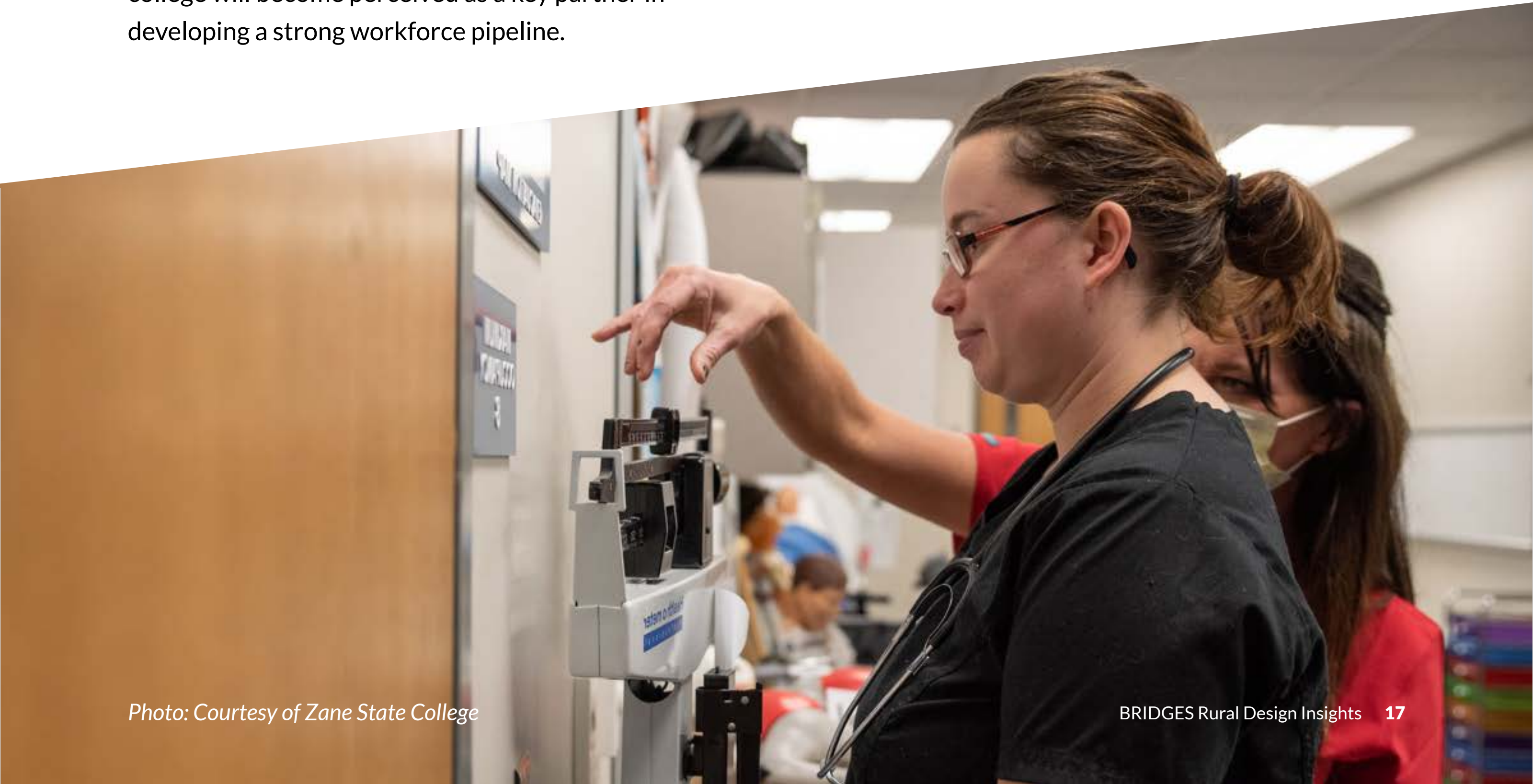
2,500
students



Pilot Overview

Students get an industry-related job where they are paid while taking classes and hired directly upon completion.

They attend classes two days per week and work at jobs with living wages in their fields of study the other three days. For its first cohort, ZSC includes learners looking for career pathways leading to in-demand, entry-level accounting jobs at six local businesses throughout the college service region. The program will immediately scale in the fall semester to include other in-demand programs and will embed 21st century skill micro-credentials into stackable pathways in engineering and healthcare fields. Zane State hopes this pilot will offer learners flexible opportunities to build job-relevant skills and that through collaboration with local employers, the college will become perceived as a key partner in developing a strong workforce pipeline.



Learners of focus

Adults who are:
+ underemployed, unemployed, or have low incomes
+ past stopped-out learners.

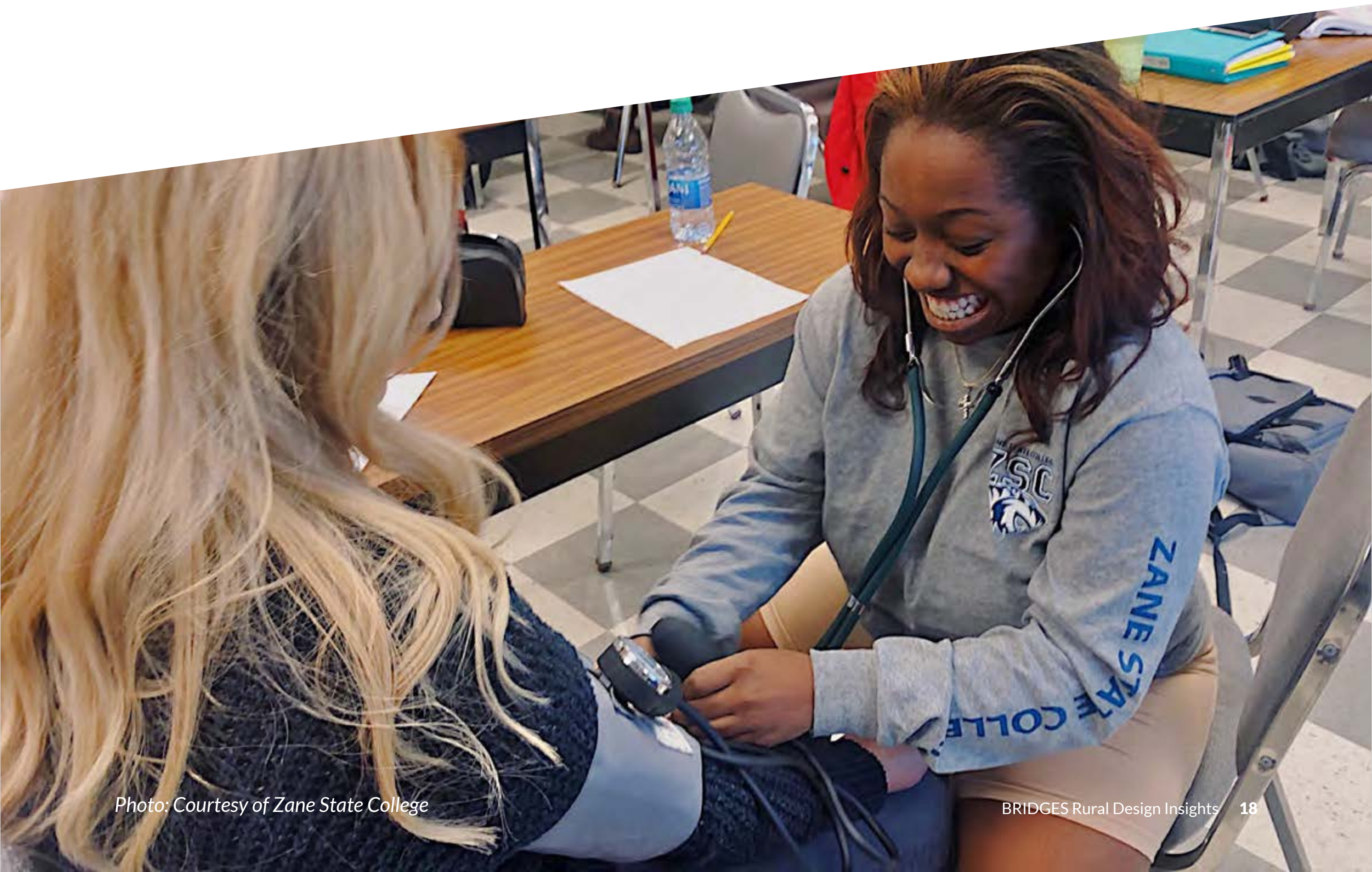
Connection to inclusive local economic growth

This pilot aims to increase the confidence of learners to seek additional training and education, thus increasing the number of skilled workers available to hire for living-wage jobs.

“

What most excited me about our pilot is that it is an innovative way to connect our college to the local economy and creates new partnerships.

JENNIFER KING
Faculty Member
Zane State College



Eastern Maine Community College

PILOT: Destination You: Your Plan, Your Path, Your Success

About Eastern Maine Community College

Eastern Maine Community College's (EMCC) main campus is located on 72 acres in Bangor, ME, and serves a large geographical area that reaches all the way to Maine's east coast and includes two additional campuses in its service region. Eastern Maine serves a total learner population of over 2,000 and also offers residential campus housing. During the BRIDGES Understand phase, EMCC learned some of the most rural parts of its service area were experiencing unemployment rates of over 40 percent. As a result, they wanted to design flexible pathways leading to career outcomes that have value for learners individually, resulting in community-wide economic growth.

3

campuses

2,000

total learner
population



Pilot Overview

Destination You is a free, 8-week, for-credit experience that connects learners to employers while helping them create individual plans for future education and career opportunities.

Along the way, learners develop the skills they need to be life-ready, education-ready, and work-ready and earn the [EMCC Opportunity Ready badge](#) upon completion. Throughout this course, learners explore in-demand, career pathways that meet them where they are in their training, education, and life journeys as they look to become skilled workers with credentials of value. In addition to exploring career and pathway opportunities, learners receive financial literacy support, build a personal board of advisors to help them along their path, and connect with other learners,

mentors, and instructors in an online community.

Baked into the program design, employers join in-person and online sessions to discuss positions and career paths within their companies and work with learners on interview skills.

EMCC Opportunity-Ready

Issued by [Maine Community College System](#)

Earners of the EMCC Opportunity-Ready badge have the skills necessary to identify and pursue meaningful opportunities in their lives. They have demonstrated exploration of life-readiness, education-readiness, and work-readiness skills that support their future success in a variety of settings. They have demonstrated an ability to use reflection, effective planning, and goal setting to link their personal strengths and interests to educational and career pathways.

Skills

- 21st Century Skills
- Career Readiness Skills
- Communication - Written And Oral
- Confidence
- Creativity
- Education Readiness Skills
- Effective Planning
- Goal Setting
- Informational Interviewing
- Information Literacy
- Life Readiness Skills
- Persistence
- Personal Initiative
- Professional Etiquette
- Reflection
- Self-Assessment
- Self-Awareness
- Storytelling

Earning Criteria

© [EMCC Life-Ready](#)

Type: Certification

Level: Advanced

Time: Months

Learners of focus

+ Adults of all ages in the communities surrounding the Katahdin and Penquis Higher Education Centers who are struggling to enter or re-enter the workforce.

Connection to inclusive local economic growth

This pilot aims to increase the confidence of learners to seek additional training and education, thus increasing the number of skilled workers available to hire for living-wage jobs.

“

It's important to think about the learner holistically. The learner is not just a learner. The learner is a parent, a laborer, a father, daughter, mother, sister, wife, husband, military person — thinking about the person as a whole and understanding and honoring their background and getting them to understand that there are many things to be taken from failures they experience, just as there are many things to be taken from their successes. If they've tried something and it hasn't worked out, let's figure out how we can bring those into what you want to do moving forward. I think if we can honor those things, growth will happen, confidence will happen.

RACHEL KAHN
Former Dean
Eastern Maine Community College



College of Eastern Idaho

PILOT: Remote Marketing + Training

About College of Eastern Idaho

College of Eastern Idaho (CEI) is Idaho's newest comprehensive community college. As one of only four community colleges in Idaho, CEI's large service area stretches over 200 miles, serving close to 3,000 learners, with fewer than 20 percent of those learners attending full time. Through interviews and surveys of learners and community members during the BRIDGES Understand phase, CEI learned many people in more rural parts of its service area were not aware of the college's presence in their communities or the support that it could offer them in working toward their goals. As a result, CEI has focused its pilot on building trust, awareness, and connection to opportunities across geography.

1 of 4
community colleges
in Idaho

3,000
total learner
population



Pilot Overview

The College of Eastern Idaho's Remote Marketing + Training pilot will launch in the Teton Valley, one of its more remote service areas.

The pilot will roll out in three phases:

Phase 1:

CEI will expand upon the courses normally offered as dual credit through local high schools by opening enrollment in these virtual classes to other community members, while also offering student support services, such as tutoring, at the local business center.

Phase 2:

The second phase will build upon the online offerings by expanding into an on-site, hands-on learning experience that introduces learners to multiple career opportunities in the construction industry, one of the fastest growing industries in the region.

Phase 3:

The third phase will build a summer bridge program, with an emphasis on exploring in-demand career opportunities, while providing pre-course training so students enter the program prepared. The goal is to eventually move this bridge program to the winter months so students can enter training programs in early spring and begin working in late spring and summer, a timeframe better aligned with the seasonal nature of many in-demand jobs in the area. developing a strong workforce pipeline.



Learners of focus

+ Community members across rural parts of CEI's service region who previously could not access CEI, or were unaware of what the college could offer in terms of postsecondary training and education.

Connection to inclusive local economic growth

Each community within the large geographic service area will receive customized training that is informed by regional labor market information and validated by local employers.

“

We have to get out the door. We cannot just sit in our main campus and expect the 'field of dreams' people will come to us. We have to get out there. We have to show those [unique] rural communities that we have interest in them and want to engage them.

CHUCK BOHLEKE
Dean of Career + Technical Education
College of Eastern Idaho



BRIDGES

Design Insights on

Rural Learners

[BRIDGES Rural, Part 1: Understanding the Potential of Rural Community College Learners](#), the first insights brief published during the summer of 2021, shares a set of key insights surfaced from the Understand phase. This work included gallery walks with design teams, hundreds of surveys and interviews with rural learners, and local data and information.

The five insights surfaced from the first brief that informed the design of the pilots outlined above are:

- + Rural communities demonstrate a deep commitment to place.
- + Experiences of belonging vary within rural communities.
- + Rural communities benefit from understanding their constituents.
- + Education may be seen as a value and a threat in rural communities.
- + Future efforts should be built from the strengths of rural communities - with rural community colleges at the center.

Through additional interviews and focus groups with learners in all of our BRIDGES rural design communities, we sought to move from our early learning and understanding to testing the ideas and approaches with learners, employers, and community members.

Each BRIDGES Rural team created prototypes that they then shared back out with their local stakeholders. Throughout the prototyping phase, teams collectively received feedback from over 400 participants to strengthen these approaches and the design of their pilots. That feedback, as well as early testing of pilots specifically with learners led to the design insights presented below.

Design Insight #1:

Future Efforts Should Include a Greater Understanding of the Diversity of Learners within Each Rural Community

To truly support rural initiatives, it's critical to understand the diversity of communities within these vast service areas and create place-based opportunities and services to support often neglected geographic areas and historically excluded groups of people who live there.

- + To better understand the diversity of their communities, institutions should conduct focus groups and interviews with potential learners, specifically with populations who are currently disengaged from the institution.
- + These focus groups and learning opportunities must take place in these more rural and remote service areas.
- + Community members need to see the institution as part of their community and not as an outsider when it comes to better understanding both the opportunities and the barriers.

The BRIDGES cohort institutions spent the majority of their time during the Understand phase hearing from people directly about how the institution is perceived in areas outside of the main campus service region and used this feedback to guide what services and opportunities should be offered, as well as to identify new partnerships, and to allow the communities themselves to be the drivers for this change.

DESIGN INSIGHTS IN ACTION

Early in the design process, Eastern Maine Community College recognized the Katahdin region as one of the communities within their service area where they needed to do a deeper dive to understand the learners who had not engaged in postsecondary education and training. In 2019, unemployment in this region was three times higher than in the state of Maine as a whole. Throughout the Understand phase, they talked to learners, community members, and local K-12 stakeholders and found that many community members were disengaged from education and did not see themselves as “college” material. Through this deeper understanding, Destination You was developed for learners living in the Katahdin region and time is spent developing skills in life-readiness, education-readiness, and work-readiness that help support their future success by linking their personal strengths and interests to educational and career pathways for in-demand jobs within their community.

Design Insight #2:

Flexible Learning Options are Essential to Rural Learners

To best support learners, institutions must be prepared to help them overcome logistical challenges.

- + The vast nature of rural communities and known barriers in transportation require institutions to meet learners where they are. This means moving beyond traditional delivery methods to accommodate learners with changing schedules and those who do not have stable access to technology and broadband.
- + Flexible options for creatively combining work and school can support adults' sense of agency and their access to and success within programs.

All of this points to the need for flexibility and meaningful options for how to better fit learning into their lives. Community colleges can be responsive by creating multiple entry points and modalities of learning.

DESIGN INSIGHTS IN ACTION

Finger Lakes Community College's GRIT pilot offers learners the option to come to class on-site in their local community or virtually at home. FLCC selected its two initial learning sites based on their rurality, their distance from its current campus locations, their proximity to advanced manufacturing employers, and their accessibility by different transit options. Learner and community member input informed class and lab times set in the early evenings and on weekends. By creating a single course section that includes learners from both learning sites and those attending virtually, FLCC exceeded its enrollment requirements for the class.

Design Insight #3:

More Work-Based Learning Opportunities Are Critical to Increase Rural Learner Success

In most rural areas, there is an expectation that learners will go straight to work and contribute to their family financially as soon as they are able.

- + Rural institutions must align their programs with the needs of their local economies, which will often include many seasonal jobs. Seasonal work can be an opportunity for learners to gain hands-on experience that better prepares them for the next step in their careers.
- + Community colleges can play an essential role at leveraging their employer partnerships to integrate work-based learning opportunities as a part of their program design. These opportunities empower learners to build job-relevant skills, explore career options, and bring in income as they learn. Learners' sense of growth and agency can be furthered through learning experiences that help them progress visibly in the direction of their goals.

These types of employer partnerships are key for institutions in creating pathways that are not only easy to navigate but also allow learners to learn on the job while earning wages and additional credentials that can lead to more employment opportunities.

DESIGN INSIGHTS IN ACTION

At Zane State College, the national skilled workforce shortage has brought regional employers and learners to the table to redesign approaches when it comes to the creation of earn-and-learn models. One of the earlier barriers to design was trying to align cohort models with jobs that rely on shift work. Through multiple sessions and meetings, one large manufacturing employer added a weekend shift so employees could work 36 hours and be considered full-time. With this additional shift, employees can attend classes and training programs during the week, and still be eligible for company benefits and tuition reimbursement while earning a living wage.

Design Insight #4:

Rural Community Colleges Can Be Trusted Hubs to Drive Economic Mobility

Community colleges, especially in rural communities, are thinking beyond traditional course delivery when engaging learners who have been systemically underinvested in and underserved. As discussed in the [first BRIDGES Rural Insights Brief](#), many rural community members expressed they often felt disconnected from their colleges and the programs they offered when it came to experiences beyond the traditional college degree pathways. Community members grappled with where to even begin when it came to thinking about their future goals and how the community college may be able to help them achieve their aspirations. Others explained college was not something they believed to be accessible to them and their understanding of what “college is” did not include opportunities for those who found themselves disconnected from society and community in some way in the past, whether that be justice impacted, time spent in recovery, or other life experiences that delayed their aspirations and goals.

- + To truly be the “hubs” within their community, institutions must ensure they have the right relationships to help all learners succeed and thrive.
- + This includes deepening partnerships with local community-based groups, local justice systems, faith groups, high schools, and others.

DESIGN INSIGHTS IN ACTION

During the BRIDGES Understand phase, Washington State Community College’s institutional design team learned the vast majority of jobs in their area do not offer a living wage for single parents, and many parent learners shared the barriers they work to better support their families. As one WSCC learner said, “I am a single mother, so child care has been a challenge, and there are lots of adults with children who go to school here, so it is not uncommon for students to have to miss class due to lack of child care.” The WSCC team realized focusing on parent learners would help them bolster the growth of their community’s workforce today and for generations to come. [The partnership they have forged with their local Boys and Girls Club and Ohio Job and Family Services will offer WSCC learners free child care – with meals, learning support, snacks, and enrichment activities provided – while parent learners are in class.](#)

Design Insight #5:

Marketing and Outreach must be Targeted to Subregions within the Rural Community College Service Area

Rural community colleges often serve large geographical areas that span multiple counties and communities. However, a critical insight from this work shows us that marketing and outreach efforts are often created for the needs of those living in close proximity to the main campus.

+ As institutions seek to serve all potential learners throughout their vast service areas, they must understand the unique economic and training opportunities for each of these sub-communities and then create place-bound regional programs as well as customized marketing materials.

DESIGN INSIGHTS IN ACTION

During early prototype testing, the College of Eastern Idaho realized they needed to spend more time in the Teton Valley talking to local community members, employers, and learners before deciding which programs to offer at their Teton Valley Outreach Center. Core team members decided to invest in a booth at the local farmers market where they talked to community members and what they thought the biggest areas of opportunities were for economic development. Through this engagement, [they connected with the local newspaper and community officials to distribute a survey accessible to all community members](#). While a majority of those who answered the survey were aware of CEI, more than 90 percent felt there was not enough access to higher education in the area and recommended additional programs focused on outdoor recreation and construction trades.

Going Forward

As the nation continues to struggle with what employers are calling a “skilled labor shortage,” community colleges are well positioned to be the “great connectors” when it comes to providing both short-term and long-term, skills-based training opportunities. These pathways are even more important in rural areas where populations are smaller and employers may have an even more challenging time finding and training the talent they need. Rural community colleges have the opportunity to be the training center for both new and current employees, as well as a partner for new industries which are seeking to train a remote workforce. They can act as a connector between their diverse learners and their broader communities and provide sustained and customized support within each of the communities they serve.

Two other projects currently underway at the Lab, the [Community College Growth Engine Fund](#) and [XCredit](#), both focus on building on learner skills to identify pathways to credentials that can immediately impact a learner’s ability to earn family-sustaining wages. As the traditional narrative about what “college is” continues to be dismantled, shorter, stackable pathways can break down traditional degrees to make them more accessible and affordable to new majority learners.



As the BRIDGES Rural pilots launch in the spring semester of 2022, institutions will continue to test and iterate on the models, ensuring they continue to support learner goals as well as increase access to jobs with family-sustaining wages. They will leverage the Lab's Rural Higher Education and Training [community of practice](#) space located on the Participate platform to continue to share out what they are learning, as well as what resources will be needed for continued sustainability and scale of the pilots. This space has been built for institutions and practitioners to not only share with each other, but also to engage in conversations regarding partnership development and opportunities to learn from others in the field.

FIVE CRITICAL QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR INSTITUTIONS:

- + How might we create pathways with different learning modalities that are flexible enough to meet learners' ever-changing needs?**
- + How might we recognize our learners' need to work while in school by creating pathways that support learners, financially and academically, throughout their entire careers?**
- + Who are the learners within our communities that we are not currently serving well? How might we learn more with them as we continue to design approaches for them?**
- + How are our different communities and service areas different from each other? Are we providing opportunities that are community-specific and are meeting the needs of these diverse learner and employer populations?**
- + Recognizing limited capacity in most rural community colleges, how might we build from within these communities by partnering with other support and service organizations for greater and sustainable impact?**

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