

Promising Practices Brief:

The Power of Pell

Mott Community College's Use of Federal Aid to Train Unemployed Workers and Dissolve Silos Between Credit and Noncredit

Introduction

This *Promising Practices* brief is one of a series of reports jointly published by the Aspen Institute Workforce Strategies Initiative (AspenWSI) and Achieving the Dream based on cases from a U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant consortium. Led by Northern Virginia Community College, the consortium includes seven colleges. This brief focuses on how the grant helped spur Mott Community College to institutionalize the use of Pell Grants to fund noncredit job training and expand college services for noncredit students.

AspenWSI and Achieving the Dream chose the topics of these reports based on our observations as managers of the consortium's peer learning community. Earlier versions of the reports, based on interviews, data, and document reviews for each site, were used as learning cases with grant project leaders and staff within the consortium. These updated published briefs provide the field with examples of innovative capacity-development initiatives that better serve more students as a result of a major, multiyear investment.

Mott Community College has a longstanding mission to offer area residents tuition-free career training to support their urgent employment needs.

The College Access Challenge

Serving the economically distressed community of Flint, Michigan, Mott Community College has a longstanding mission to offer area residents tuition-free career training to support their urgent employment needs. Despite leveraging a variety

of public and private funds to cover the cost of these noncredit occupational programs, securing a more sustainable and substantial source of tuition revenue has proved increasingly difficult in recent years due to declining public dollars for workforce development.

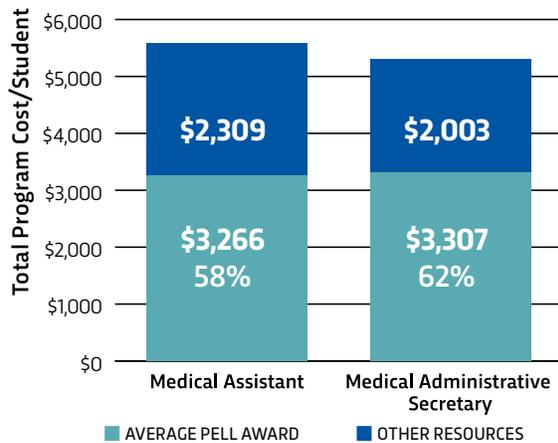
Michigan's No Worker Left Behind tuition assistance program had been a significant source of funding for training until the program ended in 2010. That disruption prompted Mott Community College to explore other options for enabling unemployed and low-income students to continue participating in career training offered by the college. It eventually took the unusual step of awarding Pell Grants to students in two noncredit health care certificate programs to help cover the cost of their training. Although permissible under federal financial aid rules, community colleges do not typically access Pell funds for noncredit career training programs. To do so, Mott made numerous changes both in the delivery of its noncredit programs and in deeply engrained, institution-wide systems and practices so that it could disperse Pell funds through the "clock hour" formula required by the U.S. Department of Education for noncredit programs. As a result of these changes, the college can help noncredit students access services and opportunities that had previously been limited to credit students.

Results to Date

Mott Community College made the Medical Assistant and Medical Administrative Specialist programs Pell-eligible, which has enabled 43 of the 92 overall students (47 percent) in these programs in the four terms between winter 2014 and summer 2015 to receive Pell Grants. This helped defray a large share of their expenses for tuition, books, uniforms, vaccination requirements, and fees for certification exams (see Figure 1). Mott drew an estimated \$141,000 in Pell Grant funds in support of the 43 students. While the

college's Workforce Development programs have long braided funding to match program and participant needs with various federal, state, local, and philanthropic funding sources, the influx of renewable federal resources for financial aid has helped ensure that Mott can continue offering a full array of services in the two health care certificate programs after current grants expire.

Figure 1: Share of Per-Student Program Costs Covered by Pell



Source: Mott Community College. Author calculations of average Pell award for winter 2014, summer 2014, winter 2015, and summer 2015 terms for 43 students who used Pell Grants to pay for program costs. Program costs cover tuition and books, uniforms, required vaccinations, and state certification exam.

Mott has outcomes data for students for three of the four terms, completed in 2014 and 2015, that have had enough post-training time to measure employment outcomes, illustrating the success of the Medical Assistant and Medical Administration programs. Mott enrolled a total of

68 students in these certificate programs during those terms, including students whose tuition was funded by Pell Grants. Fifty-eight of the students (85 percent) were unemployed upon entering the program. Nearly all students (96 percent) completed the program and earned a certificate of completion from the college.

Of those who enrolled, 60 percent passed the state certification exam in the respective fields within 60 days. Nearly all enrollees secured employment upon completion (97 percent). Sixty-nine percent of enrollees secured training-related employment within 60 days of completing the program.*

All students employed before enrolling in the program increased their earnings. They earned on average \$8.15 per hour before training and received increases ranging from \$1.85 to \$5.65 per hour, with post-program wages as high as \$14 per hour. (See Figure 2 for program completion and employment outcomes.)

Making Noncredit Certificate Programs Pell-Eligible

An eligible student may use a Pell Grant to pay for tuition in a noncredit program delivered by an accredited postsecondary institution under the following conditions:¹

- ▶ The student is enrolled in a certificate or diploma program that leads to gainful employment in a recognized occupation.
- ▶ Said certificate or diploma program contains at least 600 clock hours over a minimum of 15

¹ Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2012 Fall Webinar Training Series, posted at

Figure 2: Student Program Completion and Employment Outcomes

	Total Enrolled (two terms in 2014 and one in 2015)	Completed Training and Received Mott Credential	Earned State Certification (number and percentage of enrollees)	Secured Training- related Employment (number and percentage of enrollees)
Medical Assistant	39	36 / 92%	26 / 67%	25 / 64%
Medical Administrative Specialist	29	29 / 100%	15 / 52%	22 / 76%
Total	68	65 / 96%	41 / 60%	47 / 69%*

Source: Mott Community College

*According to Mott's case review, an additional 9 students secured training-related employment after the 60-day post-program outcomes measurement timeframe, bringing the final training-related employment outcome up to 82%.

weeks of instruction. A 300-hour program may qualify if students have previously completed the equivalent of an associate's degree. A clock hour is a period of time that contains 50 to 60 minutes of class, lecture, or recitation, or faculty-supervised laboratory, shop training, or internship.

The Pell Grant is disbursed in two payment periods: upon completion of half of all clock hours and program weeks and after completion of all clock hours and program weeks.

Mott Community College administrators made several changes to institutional systems and practices to qualify the Medical Assistant and Medical Administrative Specialist programs for Pell Grant eligibility.

► **Establishing clock-hour terms:** The Financial Aid Office worked with Workforce Development to establish new clock-hour terms, specify the length of the two programs, and set a defined schedule for disbursing Pell awards in two payment periods, as required by federal rules.

Mott has established 25-week clock-hour terms in the fall, winter, and summer, taking care to ensure that each term starts and ends within the same fiscal year so as not to complicate disbursements and reporting for financial aid. Mott settled upon the 25-week term length to provide ample time for students to complete 600 clock hours and sit for the requisite state certification exam before the end of the term. Students attend class and related services all day, Monday through Friday. Workforce Development adjusted program content and schedules to adhere to minimum-clock-hour requirements and the new 25-week term. Thus far, Mott has offered the certificate programs during the summer and winter terms.

► **Gaining federal approval:** As required for new credit-bearing certificates, the Financial Aid Office added the Medical Assistant and Medical Administrative Specialist programs to the aid-eligible list of programs reported to the U.S. Department of Education through the Eligibility and Certification Approval Report.

This application process proved to be simple and straightforward.

► **Determining Pell eligibility and award:** Workforce Development staff helps all students enrolled in the health care certificate programs complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and submit required paperwork to the Financial Aid Office in order to determine their Pell award.

Due to constraints with the software system that Mott typically uses to calculate student

awards for traditional, semester-length programs, the Financial Aid Office has designated a staff person to calculate award amounts manually through the federally designated clock-hour formula. The software system also would normally track satisfactory academic progress and determine disbursement amounts, but the financial aid staff person does these progress checks and calculations manually in the case of the clock-hour programs.

► **Conferring institutional certificates and transcripts:** To satisfy federal credentialing requirements for aid-eligible clock-hour programs, the Registrar's Office established a career credential award and confers it on graduates of the two health care programs. The registrar also has developed a new transcript (separate from the customary one for credit-bearing coursework) to formally record noncredit certificates and program completions, which it previously had not done.

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Changing Institutional Culture to Open Opportunities to Noncredit Students

While Mott's original intent in leveraging clock-hour Pell funds was to make its noncredit workforce programs more sustainable, this strategy has revealed additional opportunities to improve student success. Making noncredit programs Pell-eligible has begun to bridge the institutional divide between credit and noncredit departments, which could lead more training participants to matriculate into and through credit-bearing certificate and degree programs. According to Mott administrators, prior to the college's qualifying these clock-hour programs for Pell Grants, the average noncredit student

Expanding the programs eligible for Pell Grants has introduced noncredit students to the broader institution—and vice versa—in ways that Mott administrators believe can help more students transition into degree programs while forging closer ties between the college’s credit and noncredit operations.

was neither exposed nor granted easy access to a range of campus resources and opportunities customarily available to credit students, such as admissions, advising, and financial aid. Instead, noncredit program staff provided their own high-touch student services.

Previously, the achievements of noncredit students were largely invisible outside Workforce Development. Students’ noncredit program completions did not appear on official transcripts, typically articulate into credit toward a relevant degree field, or result in an institutionally conferred credential, although students in noncredit health care programs could take state exams to receive industry-recognized certifications. In short, the institutional culture made it seem to noncredit students that they were not “real” college students—a misperception that many of them may have internalized by lowering their expectations and prospects of ever earning an associate’s degree and transferring to a bachelor’s degree program.

Expanding the programs eligible for Pell Grants has introduced noncredit students to the broader institution—and vice versa—in ways that Mott administrators believe can help more students transition into degree programs while forging closer ties between the college’s credit and noncredit operations. Doing so carries yet another potential reward for Mott. In an era of heightened accountability, using Pell Grants to aid students in noncredit certificate programs will enable Mott to report their strong employment outcomes alongside credit-bearing programs that are captured in the Title IV financial aid data collection and reporting system. According to recent research, short-term certificate programs often outperform associate’s degree programs as measured by student earnings, but their outcomes are not

usually reported on college scorecards because the students do not qualify for financial aid.²

Next Steps

Now that Mott has put into place the necessary institutional practices to make clock-hour programs Pell-eligible, Workforce Development plans to seek Pell Grant eligibility for other noncredit certificate programs that can meet the 600-clock-hour requirement. For his part, Scott Jenkins, vice president for student and administrative services, has a more ambitious goal: using broadened Pell eligibility across the institution to provide the impetus for dismantling institutional silos between credit and noncredit. He envisions a time when all students, whether they enter the college through credit or noncredit programs, can move along the same pathways toward degrees. For Jenkins, that means that an increasing number of noncredit programs would articulate to credit when students choose to continue into a degree program. Moreover, noncredit students would have full access to mainstream campus resources and services.

Jenkins sees potential benefits for credit students as well. He would like to expand their access to supportive services—such as transportation subsidies, uniforms, and tools—that are available to noncredit students through the public workforce development system.

Keys to Success

The experience of Mott suggests that other community colleges interested in making noncredit certificate programs eligible for Pell Grants may wish to consider these actions to improve the likelihood of success.

- ▶ **Seek a senior leader to champion the cause:** Vice President Jenkins provided leadership as well as managerial oversight of Financial Aid, the Registrar, and Workforce Development to ensure that each undertook the necessary actions to make the noncredit health care programs Pell eligible. Jenkins repeatedly raised a simple question in response to a multitude of obstacles identified by staff: If the federal government says Pell Grants are available for noncredit certificate programs, why can’t we as smart people figure out how to access it? His unwavering conviction

² Schneider, Mark, “The Value of Sub-Baccalaureate Credentials,” *Issues in Science and Technology*, Summer 2015. Accessed September 22, 2015.

inspired staff to work collaboratively and creatively to come up with solutions.

- ▶ **Secure the commitment of financial aid staff first:** Mott's leadership team began the project by engaging the financial aid director and working closely with financial aid staff to address their specific concerns. "The biggest challenge to offering clock-hour Pell funding is getting the financial aid staff on board," remarked Robert Matthews, Executive Dean of Workforce Development, Community, and Grants at Mott. Workforce Development staff assisted students with financial aid applications and documentation requests, taking some of the administrative burden off the financial aid staff, who had to devote extra time to calculating clock-hour Pell disbursements manually.
- ▶ **Convene interdepartmental working sessions:** Vice President Jenkins established the Workforce Records Integration Council, comprised of lead administrators from the Registrar, Financial Aid, Workforce Development, and Student and Administrative Services. The council ensured appropriate communication and collaboration on the various tasks to secure Pell Grant eligibility and, just as important, to administer and monitor the various changes to institutional systems and practices.
- ▶ **Assign dedicated staff to collaborate across departments:** Vice President Jenkins tapped into institutional resources and assigned Gail Ives, a recently retired institutional researcher-turned-consultant, to collaborate with Workforce Development and other college programs and departments to take on as much legwork as possible. Among her tasks, Ives modified existing

institutional procedural manuals to address the clock-hour-term requirements.

Mott's experience in gaining Pell Grant eligibility for noncredit clock-hour programs can provide a basic roadmap, helping other colleges identify and address the challenges of this work, develop creative solutions to internal barriers, ensure that processes are in full compliance with external accountability requirements, and keep the focus on increasing access and success for traditionally underserved students.

Resources

- Center for Law and Social Policy, *Funding Career Pathways and Career Pathway Bridges*, March 2013, pp. 36-39. Accessed March 23, 2016,
- *Clock Hour Programs: Issues in Administering Title IV Programs in a Clock Hour Environment*, U.S. Department of Education. 2012 Fall Webinar Training Series. Accessed March 23, 2016,
- "Calculating Pell and Iraq & Afghanistan Service Grant Awards." *Federal Student Handbook*, Chapter 3. U.S. Department of Education. Accessed March 23, 2016,
- Di Xu & Xiaotao Ran, *Noncredit Education in Community College: Students, Course Enrollments, and Academic Outcomes*, Community College Research Center, CCRC Working Paper No. 84, September 2015. Accessed March 23, 2016,

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