

Cultivating strong postsecondary partnerships

By Sean Owen

Organizational leaders can follow many paths to improve the quality of postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) programs. At Mississippi State University (MSU), in 2020, President Mark Keenum felt called to create an advanced pathway for community and technical college graduates with Associates of Applied Science (AAS). You see, Keenum is a community college graduate himself. And he felt MSU could do more for its stakeholders.

President Keenum challenged the administration at MSU to work with community colleges and industry to meet the needs of educators and workforce.

For learners interested in the applied sciences, an AAS once was considered the terminal degree. But, in 2023 and looking forward, many related industries need higher-level skills in the workforce. “About 25% of manufacturing employment is at the level requiring a four-year college degree,” said Mike Molnar, director of the Office of Advanced Manufacturing with the National Institute of Standards and Technology (Ryder, 2020).

Thus, Keenum proposed creating a new degree program: the Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) at MSU. Education leaders responded by soliciting feedback from community college and industry partners to gauge the most critical workforce needs and consider labor market projections. MSU then developed areas of emphasis for BAS degree programming that include advanced manufacturing, trades supervision, public management and cybersecurity.

Land-grant universities header

Three central tenets guide the work of land-grant universities — like Mississippi State — first established after the Morrill Act of 1862. “First among them is teaching,” and “later legislation added research and extension, establishing the roles of land-grant institutions in producing original agricultural research and in bringing that research to the nonuniversity public through agricultural extension” (Croft, 2022). Thus, the work undertaken to create the BAS degree fit well within the mandate set out by Morrill. New degree programs like MSU’s BAS, can expand the CTE pathway ecosystem in a manner that is responsive to industry needs for more management-ready graduates in all career clusters (Goger, 2019). Further, opportunities to develop and validate new skills will benefit postsecondary CTE faculty as well as community college students in high-quality CTE programs (Perez-Johnson & Holzer, 2021).

“To provide access and opportunity to all sectors of Mississippi’s diverse population & to offer excellent programs of teaching, research and service.” (Mississippi State University, 2023)

In fact, as the MSU's BAS program has matured, university administration has begun offering tuition discounts for postsecondary CTE instructors to incentivize their enrollment. Mississippi State recognized that postsecondary CTE faculty are vital in the development of tomorrow's workforce. By reducing the financial barrier is reduced, more CTE educators will seek to obtain advanced degrees (Giancola & Davidson, 2015). Four-year institutions should foster strong partnerships with two-year colleges' CTE programs and assist CTE faculty in their pursuit of advanced credentials of value. Because numerous studies have shown that continuing education among CTE teachers has a positive impact on instructional quality and student outcomes (Burroughs et al., 2019; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2014).

Partnerships promote change.

Community and technical college faculty who engage in MSU's BAS degree programs gain new and relevant skills as their fields evolve. These efforts toward continuing education also provide validation to the merit of career and technical education pathways. This sentiment is echoed by CTE leaders at Mississippi State's partner schools, including Dwayne Casey, associate vice-president of workforce solutions and CTE, and Katie Broadway, director of CTE and program advancement, at Northwest Mississippi Community College (NWCC). Not only do faculty enhance their own technical skill development, but they also may learn new instructional methodologies to use in their courses. Casey and Broadway also encourage their college's graduates to continue their education whether it be through their employers or in university settings.

Michael Franks, lead instructor for industrial electronics engineering technology at NWCC, enrolled at MSU to further his education for himself and his students. He felt that he could be a model to his students by always seeking to gain more knowledge and improve his skills. Franks strives to impress on his students that they must continue learning. The scope of educators' professional knowledge has been linked to influence student outcomes (Burroughs et al., 2019).

National standards for teaching and learning highlight the importance of deepening content knowledge among CTE educators.

(Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2023)

Partnerships add value.

By expanding the vertical alignment of CTE pathways to four-year institutions through the BAS degree, CTE educators and AAS graduates benefit from opportunities to advance or develop new skills. The workforce is changing rapidly, and though CTE programs produce highly skilled graduates, a more concerted effort is needed to meet new workforce demands. Cody Spence, director of CTE at East Central Community College (ECCC) in Decatur, Mississippi, has promoted the BAS degree program and other workforce education offerings to make sure ECCC's programs remain relevant.

Harold Hollingsworth, an ECCC heating and air conditioning technology instructor with nearly 30 years of combined experience in the industry and education, is pursuing his BAS in trades supervision. He said that the degree program at MSU would help him meet his goal to further his education in a way that fit his needs. As an added benefit, instructors who are students themselves gain unique insight into how their CTE programs align with the university. Continuing education also demonstrates to students the importance of skill development past graduation. Spence understands that his instructors are in the business of education, and there is no better way than finding new ways to earn credentials of value.

Partnerships support access and equity goals.

Educational entities should strive to work cooperatively to build a dynamic educational ecosystem that can adapt. Also, they should create learning environments that promote equity and inclusion for all. Casey, Broadway and Spence view their partnerships with MSU as a way to reduce the stigma of CTE pathways as less than. They also agreed that the BAS degree has expanded education options for their CTE faculty and students in a way that was not available in the past. Another unintentional, positive effect of this partnership work: It has helped bolster community colleges' CTE recruitment efforts by demonstrating that a postsecondary CTE degree is and always has been on par with other academic degrees.

Building bridges from associate to bachelor's degrees can reduce the earnings and achievement gaps in some career clusters as highlighted in a recent report on the importance of workforce development (Perez-Johnson & Holzer, 2021). Initiatives such as this at MSU provide new pathways to upward mobility for underrepresented students, displaced workers and adult learners who have been underserved by current forms of postsecondary education. Increasing applied baccalaureate degree opportunities for AAS graduates not only opens doors to more careers but also to graduate and professional degree options that were never before attainable. These opportunities also help states meet workforce needs by enhancing access and equity for all of its citizens (D'Amico et al., 2020).

Takeaways

Creating purposeful partnerships with community colleges and universities is one strategy CTE leaders can use to meet the demands of a dynamic landscape in 2023 and beyond. Educators at all levels must have the humility to be introspective. Evaluate current offerings to ensure that programs provide value to everyone involved.

After engaging in such reflection, Mississippi State University created the BAS degree to strengthen CTE partnerships — fully embracing its mission to provide access and opportunity to all citizens. MSU seeks to provide value in creating a resilient workforce, meeting students' needs so they might be prepared to meet the industry's needs. Further, by creating incentives for postsecondary CTE faculty to pursue advanced degrees or

credentials of value, educators convey to their students the value of continued education while reducing the external stigma that CTE is not valued by workforce.

Recommendations

As much as leaders in career and technical education have embraced the value of partnerships and advisory groups, we can always do more to ensure that we have designed high-quality CTE programs of study. Using guides such as ACTE's *Quality CTE Program of Study Framework* (Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018) and resources from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2023), CTE educators can evaluate their programs. Because, as with any educational initiative, we are tasked to do the best we can for our students.

Sean Owen, Ph.D., is director of career and technical partnerships at Mississippi State University overseeing the BAS degree program. Previously, he led Mississippi's statewide CTE assessment initiatives for the state of Mississippi and also served as president of the Consortium for Research on Educational Assessment and Teaching Effectiveness.

REFERENCES

- Burroughs, N., Gardner, J., Lee, Y., Guo, S., Touitou, I., Jansen, K., & Schmidt, W. (2019). Review of the literature on teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. In N. Burroughs, J. Gardner, Y. Lee, S. Guo, I. Touitou, K. Jansen, & W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Teaching for excellence and equity: Analyzing teacher characteristics, behaviors and student outcomes with TIMSS*. Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16151-4_2
- Croft, G.K. (2022). *The U.S. land-grant university system: Overview and role in agricultural research*. Congressional Research Service.
- D'Amico, M.M., Chapman, L.M., & Robertson, S. (2020). Associate in Applied Science transfer and articulation: An issue of access and equity. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 45(5), 378–383.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1741477>
- Giancola, J., & Davidson, E. (2015). Breaking down walls: Increasing access to four-year colleges for high-achieving community college students.
<https://www.jkcf.org/research/breaking-down-walls-increasing-access-to-four-year-colleges-for-high-achieving-community-college-students/>
- Goger, A. (2019). Free college won't be enough to prepare Americans for the future of work. *The Avenue*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2019/10/15/free-college-wont-be-enough-to-prepare-americans-for-the-future-of-work/>

- Imperatore, C., & Hyslop, A. (2018). *2018 ACTE quality CTE program of study framework*. ACTE.
- Mississippi State University. (2023). *Vision & mission*.
<https://www.president.msstate.edu/communications/vision-mission/>
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. (2023). Standards.
<https://www.nbpts.org/certification/standards/>
- Perez-Johnson, I., & Holzer, H. (2021). *The importance of workforce development for a future-ready, resilient, and equitable American economy*. American Institutes for Research.
- Ryder, J. (2020). Advanced manufacturing: Industry emphasis on skills, not degrees. *WorkingNation*. <https://workingnation.com/advanced-manufacturing-industry-emphasis-on-skills-not-degrees/>