



BUILDING BETTER FUTURES FOR LEARNERS: AN OVERVIEW OF AREA TECHNICAL CENTERS

Area Technical Centers (ACTs) are Career Technical Education (CTE)-focused institutions that serve learners from across multiple geographies, such as school districts, educational service areas and workforce development areas or regions.ⁱ These institutions offer secondary and sub-baccalaureate level education and training and can serve both secondary and postsecondary learners or either of these populations exclusively.ⁱⁱ There are approximately 1,346 unique ATCs across 39 states and U.S. territories, and 1,481 ATCs when counting all affiliated locations of an ATC. In fact, there are more ATCs in the country than community colleges.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite this, ATCs are often underutilized as a source for postsecondary attainment—largely due to a lack of knowledge about the role these institutions have in education and workforce development.

The need for Americans to obtain postsecondary skills and credentials has never been more apparent. Yet just half of Americans hold a credential beyond high school. The data are even more daunting considering the disparities in attainment, with significantly more White and Asian American adults obtaining postsecondary credentials than Black, Latinx or Native American adults. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the labor market, leaving 3.8 million people permanently out of work.^{iv} Once again, Black and Latinx populations and Americans without education beyond a high school diploma were the most affected by the latest economic downturn. While the future of the labor market may be uncertain, one consistent trend is the need for Americans to upskills or reskill in order to advance in a career or transition to a new industry.

INCLUSION OF ATCS IN STATEWIDE POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT

There has been ongoing national attention to the evolving role of postsecondary credentials and degrees. The majority of states, a total of 44, have a statewide postsecondary attainment goal.^v These efforts have largely been driven Lumina Foundation’s nationwide goal of equipping at least 60 percent of the working age population with a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025. In order to achieve this, nearly seven million more individuals will need to earn such a credential over the next five years. The success of this effort depends on the ability to fully leverage the nation’s postsecondary education and workforce training system—a diverse ecosystem composed of educational institutions and training providers that must work in unison to provide opportunity for every learner. ATCs are a valuable part of this ecosystem but are not always elevated in state and federal policy in a significant enough way.

A survey by Advance CTE of all 50 states, DC and U.S. territories found that the majority of respondents strongly agree or agree that ATCs help them meet statewide postsecondary goals through delivery of industry-recognized credentials, postsecondary non-degree certifications, short-term certifications and apprenticeship programs.

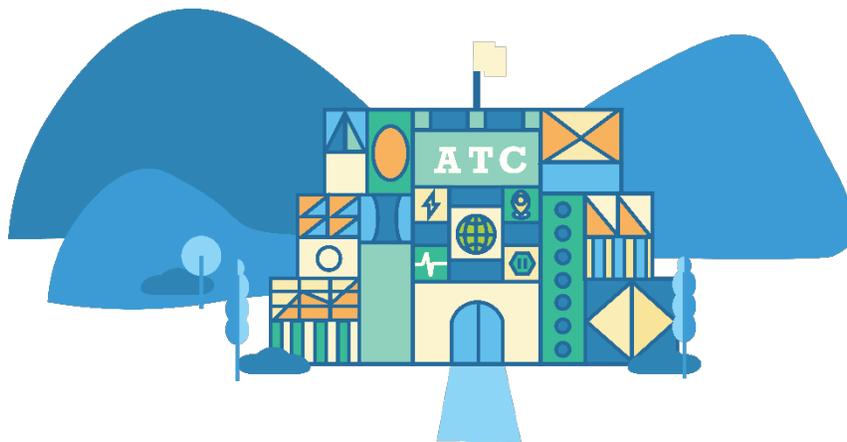
ATCs are well poised to contribute to a state’s postsecondary attainment goal, as well as address significant equity issues in attainment. For one, ATCs that offer postsecondary education are often accredited and therefore are eligible for federal financial aid. If not, ATCs are still relatively low cost, making them an accessible option. For instance, while the average cost per credit hour at public two-year institutions is \$142, instruction at ATCs is approximately \$2 per clock hour.^{vi} Despite this, ATCs often have a minimal role in a state’s postsecondary attainment strategy, especially compared to two and four-year institutions. This is largely due to the fact that ATCs are generally unknown, underfunded and underutilized.

ATCs can play an important role in helping learners equitably access and attain postsecondary education and related credentials of value, and it is a missed opportunity to not include these institutions in a postsecondary or workforce strategy. ATCs are able to be quickly respond to changing labor market needs, and prepare learners for a job that is part of a career pathway and leads to self-sufficiency. Inclusion of ATCs in a state postsecondary attainment strategy elevates the importance of these institutions, and communicates the opportunities they provide.

Florida Technical Colleges: Supporting Postsecondary Skill and Credential Attainment

One state that utilizes ATCs to support workers and contribute to the postsecondary attainment goal is Florida. The state has taken measures to ensure that ATCs, referred to as technical colleges in Florida, are a central part of the education and workforce development system, such as ensuring ATCs are eligible under Title IV of the Higher Education Act (HEA) so that learners can access federal financial aid.

Florida is one of the few states in which ATCs exclusively serve postsecondary/adult learners.¹ The *Get There Florida* campaign is designed to encourage Floridians to earn stackable postsecondary credentials that lead to a high-wage in-demand career. This message is further supported by Florida law which requires ATCs and state colleges to create regional pathway articulation agreements. Each certificate program offered by a technical college must be aligned with an associate degree offered by a state college that serves the same region.¹ State colleges must guarantee that clock hours at the ATC are credited toward the aligned associates degree. Florida’s ATCs must meet and exceed the state’s



RECOMMENDATIONS

For the full potential of ATCs to be realized, and individuals to benefit to the greatest extent, these institutions must be included in education and workforce planning. With increased statewide postsecondary attainment as a common goal across the country, ATCs must be brought to the table. Though much of the work so far has taken place at the state and local levels, a federal partnership is necessary to increasing access and bringing ATCs to their full potential. Measures that can be taken include:

- Build awareness of and visibility and support for the role of ATCs;
- Recognize ATCs as part of both postsecondary and workforce development delivery systems;
- Ensure ATCs are accurately counted by the National Center for Education Statistics;
- Support states' collection of improved data and accountability for ATCs; and
- Ensure equitable access and support for learner participation in the ATCs of their choice.

For more information on the national landscape of ATCs and policy recommendations to maximize the impact of these institutions, check out www.AreaTechnicalCenters.org.

ⁱ There is no universal definition or overarching consensus for what constitutes an ATC. This definition was therefore created for the purposes of the report.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2020/07/02/luminas-big-goal-still-within-reach-but-much-work-remains-to-be-done/?sh=1a233827696a>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/>

^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/03/business/economy/coronavirus-permanent-job-losses.html>

^v <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2020/07/02/luminas-big-goal-still-within-reach-but-much-work-remains-to-be-done/?sh=1a233827696a>

^{vi} <https://educationdata.org/cost-of-a-college-class-or-credit-hour#:~:text=California%20community%20colleges%20charge%20the,at%20%241%2C851%20per%20credit%20hour>