



Area Technical Centers: Supporting Postsecondary Skill and Credential Attainment in Oklahoma

Lumina Foundation’s Stronger Nation initiative finds that just half of Americans hold a credential beyond high school.¹ There is great disparity by race and education level in who has access to the skills and credentials needed to transition into new careers or advance in current ones. In response to this need, Lumina Foundation set a national goal of equipping at least 60 percent of the working-age population with a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025, challenging each state to set its own postsecondary attainment goal; — and most have. States have many resources they can leverage to achieve their postsecondary attainment goals, including area technical centers (ATCs).

ATCs can play an important role in helping learners equitably access and attain postsecondary education and related credentials of value. ATCs are institutions that are focused on Career Technical Education (CTE). They serve learners from across multiple geographies, offering sub-baccalaureate-level education and training. These institutions are nimble enough to respond to changing labor market conditions and provide learners with the skills they need to obtain credentials leading to high-wage, in-demand employment.

CONTEXT AND HISTORY

Oklahoma has a separate state agency that governs its robust system of CTE, which includes 29 ATCs, or as they are called in Oklahoma, technology centers. The first technology center, located in Tulsa, opened in 1964 with the support of federal funding from the National Education Improvement Act of 1963. Five area vocational-technical schools incorporated using this federal funding.

In 1966, State Question 434 gave voters in a school district the power to create an area

vocational school as a separate legal entity. Each of the vocational schools was designed to be governed by its own elected board of education and funded in large part by an aggregate tax base of the encompassing districts. From the inception of the area vocational-technical schools, Oklahoma designed them to serve both secondary and postsecondary learners.² Over time, the area vocational-technical schools were grouped into geographic regions known as technology center districts; each district was served by one or multiple campuses of an area vocational-technical

school, later renamed as a technology center.”

Today, technology center districts are overseen by the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education (CareerTech), a separate state agency that is governed by its own State Board of Career and Technology Education.³

POPULATION SERVED, EQUITY AND ACCESS

Oklahoma’s technology centers continue to serve both secondary and postsecondary learners. All learners statewide have access to CTE programming, though some areas of the state (such as the panhandle) have not voted to incorporate into a technology center district and receive service from either their K-12 comprehensive high school or another postsecondary institution (a community college or university) in that geographical area. At the secondary level, programs are open enrollment for learners in the defined geographic area, subject to learners’ grade point average, academic scores, and answers on an interest inventory, and they are free. At the postsecondary level, technology centers are also open enrollment but charge tuition (about \$2.00 per seat time hour, subject to state board approval to create equity statewide). All technology centers are eligible for federal financial aid, including Pell Grants, authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act,⁴ allowing learners to use this federal aid to support tuition costs, which removes certain access barriers.⁵

To increase equity within and access to technology centers, the state has partnerships with several other state agencies. There is a strong

OKLAHOMA TECHNOLOGY CENTERS AT A GLANCE

- 29 technology centers
- 58 campuses
- 22,272 secondary learners in career programs
- 9,653 adult learners in career programs
- 88% adult completion rate
- More than 19,000 industry-recognized credentials awarded
- 91% positive placement rate

Source: <https://www.okcareertech.org/about/careertech-system/annual-report-fast-facts/fast-facts-1>

intersection with Oklahoma’s tribal communities; while no technology centers exist on tribal land, representatives from CareerTech serve on Oklahoma’s Indian Education Board and Tribal Reintegration Program. Technology centers have local partnerships with the tribal communities in their regions, and many of the tribal communities sponsor scholarships for CTE programs at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. CareerTech also works directly with the Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs to increase the number of veterans receiving training at technology centers statewide.

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING; STATE POLICY BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Rules and regulations for CTE, including those for technology centers, are driven by Oklahoma Administrative Code and approved by the state Legislature.⁶ Each of the 29 technology center districts services an area aligned to a number of secondary school districts, and each technology center district hosts one technology center, though a technology center could have multiple campuses.⁷ The technology center districts are governed locally and independently, each with its own separately elected board of education that is distinct from the boards of education for the school districts they serve.⁸ Similarly, each of the technology center districts is overseen by

a superintendent, who is hired by the technology center district’s board of education. Technology centers are accredited at both the secondary and postsecondary levels by the Oklahoma State Department of Education and CareerTech, subject to accreditation guidelines, including institutional quality standards to meet federal Title IV eligibility; accreditation is reviewed on an annual basis.⁹

Beyond local taxes, funding for each of the 29 technology center districts is derived from the allocation of the state budget to CareerTech, which is then further allocated to the districts via a state-approved funding formula that is based on “enrollment, number of school sites in the district, number of instructors employed on a full-time basis, transportation, availability of funds, provision of appropriate student services for all students and appropriate state and federal laws.”¹⁰ While exact percentages vary from year to year based on that year’s adjusted formula, technology center districts are funded approximately 78 percent by local taxes and 18 percent by state allocations, with the remaining dollars provided through federal funding mechanisms such as the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Procurement Technical Assistance Network or Training for Needy Families. Accordingly, technology centers serve as eligible training providers in Oklahoma. Because both secondary and postsecondary learners are served through CareerTech, state and local allocations are not earmarked for a specific learner level unless federally mandated. This funding model has significant benefits. Since technology center districts draw largely from their aggregate tax base, they have stable, local revenue that allows them to withstand economic downturns within a certain margin. The state formula funding for technology center districts provides for some measure of flexibility, allowing the state to

look across the technology center districts and ensure that each of them, especially those in smaller or more rural districts, has the support needed to provide quality programs in times of economic hardship. Finally, because funding is not driven solely by per-student funding at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, there is little competition for learners between technology centers and local high schools. There also is little competition for funding between technology centers and other postsecondary institutions, as those institutions are funded through entirely separate allocations.

The uniqueness of Oklahoma’s policy environment allows technology centers to be nimble and adaptable to the needs of their learners and their employer community. While CareerTech approves the addition of any new CTE program of study, thus ensuring compliance with state program and content standards, technology center districts have wide latitude to add or remove approved programs of study — and do it quickly.¹¹ To add a full-time program, the technology center district submits a program of study justification, course listing, and data elements to CareerTech; state program approval ensures the new program meets state standards and federal accreditation guidelines. Technology center districts can develop short courses, customized training or short-term certificate programs without state



Technology center are nimble and adaptable to the needs of their learners and employers.



approval. Programmatic decisions are often informed by local employer advisory committees and thus are well aligned and responsive to the needs of the local community and economy. As needs rapidly shift or industry changes dictate a pivot in services, technology center districts can work quickly to design new programming or incorporate new technologies into their existing curriculum without the degree accreditation, faculty hiring, board of trustee approval and other delays inherent in full-time program approval at other postsecondary institutions.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY CENTERS IN POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT

Established in December 2016, Launch Oklahoma seeks to increase the number of Oklahomans 25-64 years old who have education or training beyond high school to 70 percent by 2025. To date, 46 percent of Oklahomans have earned a post-high school credential, with 11.4 percent earning a short-term credential.¹² Technology centers drive much of this credential attainment, with an 88 percent completion rate for participating adults in FY18, more than 19,000 industry-recognized credentials awarded, and a 91 percent positive placement rate for adult learners (employed, enrolled in additional continuing education or participating in the military six months after completion).¹³ Given these successful outcomes, Oklahoma’s technology centers play a significant role in the state’s progress toward its postsecondary attainment goal.

While successes exist, challenges in articulation, competition and exposure limit Oklahoma’s ability to contribute to postsecondary attainment statewide. First, while some technology centers have partnerships with individual postsecondary institutions to allow for specific course credit, Oklahoma does not currently have any statewide

articulation agreements in place. Because the state is the accrediting body for technology centers, the Higher Learning Commission (and other accrediting bodies) ruled that the non-technology center postsecondary institutions cannot accept specific technology center courses for credit via traditional credit transfer agreements (e.g. articulation agreements), instead relying only on prior learning assessments, contractual agreements and transfer credit blocks. Some technology centers have out-of-state articulation agreements in place. Because 44 percent of secondary and postsecondary learners continue with their education after completion of a technology center program, this lack of articulation is problematic, and it is costly and inefficient for the learner.

Second, when postsecondary institutions (other than technology centers) in Oklahoma have the financial latitude to expand programming, they have historically added non-degree, credential programs that tend to be duplicative of programs offered at the technology center. This situation creates a certain amount of competition between technology centers and their peers at community



company. In FY20, technology centers trained more than 4,000 employees through this program.¹⁶ Thirteen of Oklahoma’s technology center districts host a business incubator, which is designed to accelerate the growth of entrepreneurial companies through an array of business supports including facilities, coaching and networking opportunities. While businesses must go through an application and selection process to participate in the incubator, once connected, new businesses receive a variety of benefits:

- There is no fee or a minimal fee for facilities, so fledgling businesses can use their capital on other expenditures beyond expensive overhead.
- Businesses in the incubator can participate in a variety of networks both internally and externally. Internally, a company can work with mentors employed by the technology center or share ideas and feedback with other businesses in the incubator. Externally, the company can work with the entire employer and business

expert networks that have already been cultivated by the technology center itself.

- These incubators can serve as recruitment and awareness-building efforts for the technology center.

CONCLUSION

Oklahoma’s rich history and robust network of technology center districts position the districts to serve as a leading partner in the state’s economic vitality and help achieve the state’s postsecondary attainment goal. With the leverage of significant, dedicated state funding and the unique structure of CareerTech governance and its role as accreditor of postsecondary CTE programs, the state has a policy and political environment that affords great local autonomy and responsiveness to community needs while ensuring that program quality expectations are met.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2020/#nation>
- 2 For the purposes of this report, the term “postsecondary learners” includes adult learners.
- 3 https://www.okcareertech.org/educators/cimc/resources/downloads-1/learning-to-earn/learning-to-earn/history_of_careertech_lo_res.pdf/view
- 4 <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43159.pdf>
- 5 One center has opted out of Title IV and funds adult student aid through its foundation.
- 6 https://www.okcareertech.org/about/state-agency/rules-for-careertech/copy_of_FINALCOPYEffectiveSept132019.pdf
- 7 <https://www.okcareertech.org/technology-centers>
- 8 One of the 29 technology center districts is a dependent school district.
- 9 https://www.okcareertech.org/about/state-agency/division/accreditation/copy_of_Final030619Updated201920AccreditationGuidelines201819242019/pdf
- 10 780:10-5-4. Instructional funding. (2019). https://www.okcareertech.org/about/state-agency/rules-for-careertech/copy_of_FINALCOPYEffectiveSept132019.pdf
- 11 https://www.okcareertech.org/about/state-agency/rules-for-careertech/chapter-20-a/at_download/file
- 12 <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2020/#state/OK>
- 13 <https://www.okcareertech.org/about/careertech-system/interactive-data/tech-center-profiles>
- 14 <https://www.regiontrack.com/www/wp-content/uploads/Career-Major-Impact-Full-Report-20130311.pdf>
- 15 <https://oklahomaworks.gov/oklahoma-workforce-data/critical-occupations/>
- 16 <https://www.okcareertech.org/about/careertech-system/annual-report/FY20AnnualReport.pdf>



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