

**College:** Walters State Community College

**Location:** Morristown, Tennessee

**Practice:** Working Connections Partnership for Information Technology Training

Improving the workforce and attractiveness of a region through information technology training

*Year Started* 1999

*Budget* \$250,000 annually

*Program Participants* First year: 2 cohorts of 25

*College FTE* N/A

*Target Sector* Information technology

*Staff Size* 1 director, 3 FT faculty, and 2 PT faculty

*Structure* Program run through college

*Key Outcomes* 41 percent of participants have completed program  
0 to 50 percent are currently working in the field and continuing their education

## Introduction

Increasing demand for information technology (IT) workers presents both problem and opportunity for many rural areas. Areas that cannot meet the demand will lose out on the economic growth the sector offers. Areas that are able to meet the demand will be a step ahead in becoming competitive. The demand for IT skills presents a similar problem/opportunity for workers—especially those with lower levels of skills. With proper training for and access to IT jobs, such workers may be able to raise their standard of living. Without training and access, these workers may find few opportunities to advance themselves.

The Working Connections Program at Walters State Community College (WSCC) is a partnership

between academia, business, and the community that responds to the need for IT workers to help both the region and its workforce. The partnership has broad, interconnected goals that strengthen the IT skills training at the college and ensure workforce development and placement for community members. The result has been more IT jobs for local workers and growth for the local economy.

## Community Background

WSCC serves a ten-county rural area in southern Appalachia, a region considered distressed by state, regional, and national standards. Hamblen County, 35 miles east of Knoxville, is home to WSCC and

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic conditions	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
School to Work/ non-traditional Occup.	No	Growing	52	1.0	17	Dislocated workers, economically disadvantaged, youth/students

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>Clairborne, Cocke, Grainger, Greene, Hamblen, Hancock, Hawkins, Jefferson, Sevier, and Union Counties</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	370,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$23,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	21.3
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	6.5
<i>% Minority Population</i>	2.5
<i>% Rural Population</i>	61.3
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	53.7
<i>% College Graduates</i>	8.0

close to the Great Smoky Mountains. Agriculture (mostly corn, tobacco, and soybeans) has been the historic mainstay of the economy. But although agriculture remains an important source of jobs, the economy is shifting to manufacturing and tourism. The region’s manufacturing firms are relatively small (most employ between 25 and 100 workers) and are considered “light manufacturing” because they provide industrial support services such as heat treating, tool and die making, and lubrication. Tourism is expanding due to the area’s rich natural resources and man-made attractions.

In order to help the region’s businesses grow and to attract others into the area, investment in training—particularly IT training—is critical. The training, however, must be carried out in partnership with businesses to ensure that their needs are met. Furthermore, the training must be ongoing, so that it continually develops new skills and capabilities among the region’s workforce. Working Connections is an attempt to do just that.

## Program Description

Begun in January 1999, the program has developed courses and new degrees that allow participants to enter the workforce quickly. As students are admitted, they proceed through the program as a member of a “cohort,” receiving their training as a group and building a social network that translates into business opportunities and benefits down the road.

In addition to the technical training, students who enroll are given basic skills and employability training. Students participate in mock interviews to improve their interview skills as well as expose them to potential employers among the program partners. Members of the program’s advisory council also commit to hiring students who have completed the program and acquired necessary qualifications.

The program’s target population is the region’s disadvantaged, underemployed and/or unemployed, displaced workers, grant-eligible students, food stamp recipients, and first-generation college students. Expenses for the first cohort of students were paid for with grants. Additional slots were opened for students who could pay their own way.

Funding is provided by grants from Microsoft, the American Association of Community Colleges, and WSCC. Initial contributions equaled \$250,000 in cash and \$300,000 in hardware donations. As the program matured, the college received Microsoft software valued at an additional \$745,000.

In addition to funding, partners, including local and national firms ranging from automotive to banking and technology firms, provide guidance via the program’s advisory council, help design curriculum, and bring a diversity of need in skills and training that influence the shape of the program. The diversity illustrates that almost every sector (not just the technology sector) needs a skilled IT workforce. Finally, the partners have built relationships that go beyond the confines of the program. For example, as a result of the program and the involvement of its partners, the college now offers an associate’s degree in applied science networking; one in applied science, computer, and information technology; and six certificate programs for technicians and specialists.

Facilities for the program, located at WSCC, include a newly renovated classroom and a 25-computer workstation lab.

## Outcomes

The program has been popular from the beginning. Following an advertising campaign that extended into eastern and northern Tennessee, 65 people applied for the initial 25 slots. Consequently, a second first-year cohort was added.

In addition, most students are continuing their

education beyond the program, with many working towards Microsoft certification. A mark of its success is that every Working Connections student who has taken the certification exam passed.

Students have also participated in internships resulting in new employment opportunities. One-third to one-half of graduates currently are working within the IT sector while they continue to attend school and earn additional certifications.

Positive feedback from students is another indicator of success. "It filled a need for people of different economic situations to increase employability opportunities," one student says. Another comments:

*The accelerated program with one full day of class equaling one week of regular length classes presented the opportunity to cover more information in single sessions. This provided an innovative learning process that aided in a more focused learning situation.*

Students particularly liked the cohort approach. As one student stated:

*The combination of the accelerated program and the group's cohesiveness allowed the use of everyone's different strengths to aid someone else in the group. This took a group of strangers and let them become a group who strived to help each other, to assure success for the group. The networking and friendships will continue to provide opportunities for the future.*

## **Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability**

Among the strengths of this program is that it works toward both long- and short-term goals. In the long-term, the program helps draw firms to the region. In the short-term, existing firms benefit immediately from having a skilled, IT-competent workforce. As the demand for IT skills continues to grow in terms of skills needed and number of sectors incorporating IT, the college and its partners are indeed looking to the future and ensuring the economic stability of the region.

Funding has been the major challenge associated with the WSCC's Working Connections program. Initially, grants from major organizations covered costs of equipment and software. As the program matured, the college was able to use funds from the

Workforce Investment Act to leverage the expenses of the program. However, the college is now on its own for funding the program and maintaining the software.

Replicability prospects for this program are excellent, with securing sufficient start-up funds a key first step.

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