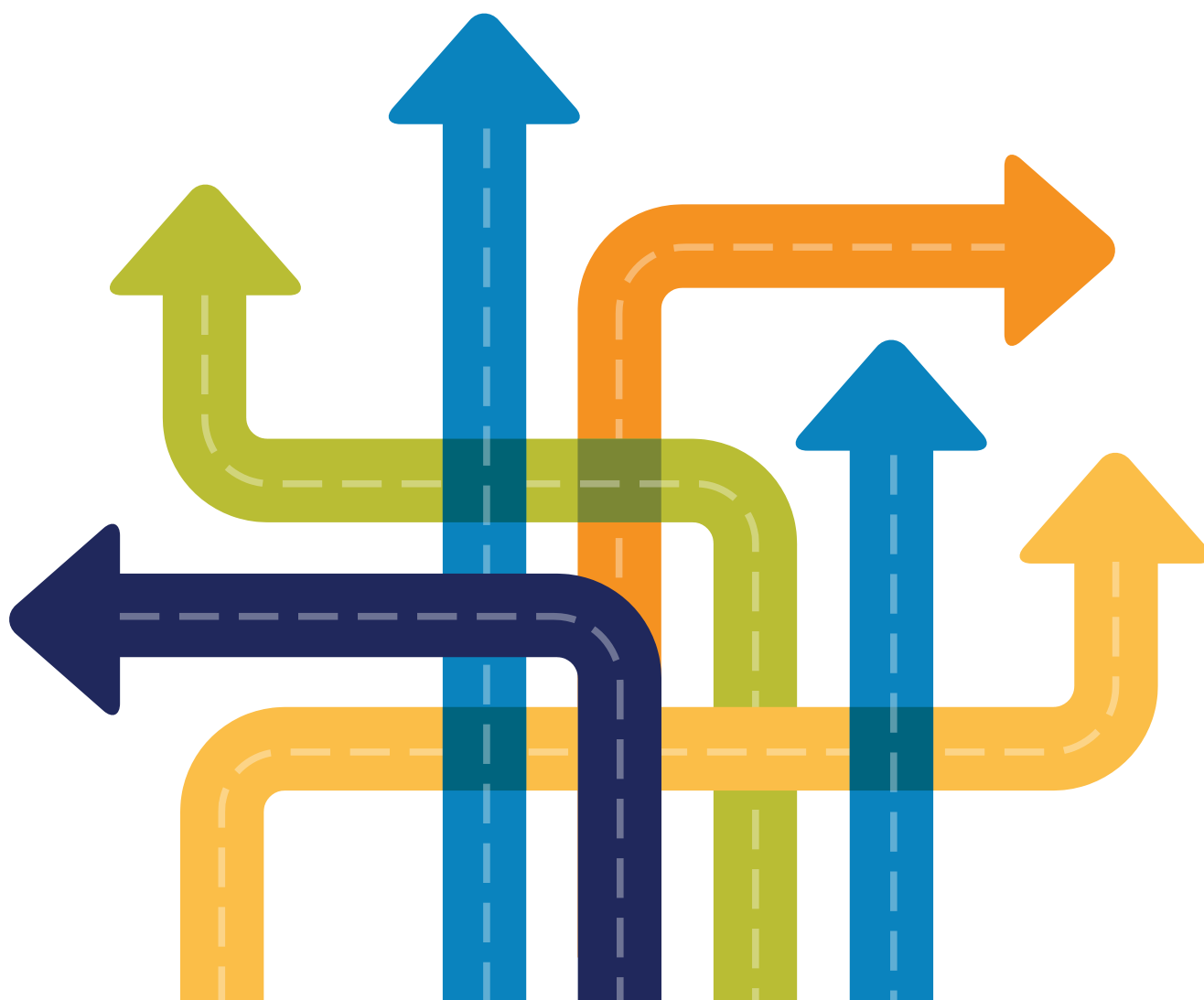


CHARTING NEW CAREER PATHWAYS: Partnering with Community Colleges in Maryland on Skills-Based Hiring



Lessons learned from ACCT's Skills-Based Hiring Initiative

By Sean Robins





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) is a non-profit educational organization of governing boards, representing more than 6,500 elected and appointed trustees who govern over 1,200 community, technical, and junior colleges in the United States and beyond. ACCT's mission is to foster the principles and practices of exemplary governance while promoting high-quality and affordable higher education, cutting-edge workforce and development training, student success, and the opportunity for all individuals to achieve economic self-sufficiency and security.

www.acct.org

Opportunity@Work's mission is to rewire the U.S. labor market so that all individuals Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARS) can work, learn, and earn to their full potential. To rewire the labor market to value skills over pedigree, Opportunity@Work uses a data-driven, two-pronged strategy – focused on supply resources and demand – to achieve greater economic mobility and racial equity on behalf of STARS. www.opportunityatwork.org

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis, Indiana committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina Foundation envisions higher learning that is easy to navigate, addresses racial injustice, and meets the nation's talent needs through a broad range of credentials. Lumina Foundation is working toward a system that prepares people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy. Funding for this project was generously provided by Lumina Foundation. www.luminafoundation.org

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In 2022, Maryland implemented a new initiative focused on removing degree requirements from state positions. This initiative opened over 19,000 jobs to more than 1.3 million individuals Skilled Through Alternative Routes (referred to as STARs throughout this brief) — such as community college, workforce training, or on-the-job experience — rather than through a bachelor’s degree in the State of Maryland. Skills-based/skills-first hiring has since branched across the U.S., with **22 states**¹ opening more than 467,000 jobs to STARs across the nation.

Following Maryland’s announcement to remove degree requirements from state positions, the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), through funding made possible by Lumina Foundation, launched the Skills-Based Hiring Initiative in 2023. The focus of ACCT’s initiative is to facilitate a pilot program in Maryland dedicated to increasing the effectiveness of skills-based hiring. ACCT partnered with Opportunity@Work, the State of Maryland, and four Maryland Community Colleges (Carroll Community College, Community College of Baltimore County, Frederick Community College, and Howard Community College).

As each organization, institution, and agency looks to implement a skills-based hiring strategy, it should be noted that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The circumstances around establishing partnerships that create pathways for STARs are unique to each. Therefore, the Playbook that was created as a part of this project serves as a resource to begin conversations and suggests what to bring to the discussions in updating or creating new pathways for STARs. This brief serves as a review of lessons learned and recommendations from the Maryland pilot program for institutions, organizations, and state/local government agencies looking to partner to create pathways for STARs. We outline the initial scope of the project and how we had to pivot, along with challenges that were encountered, lessons learned along the way, and we highlight the project that has resulted in improved collaboration with a community college and a state agency that has had significant vacancy rates.

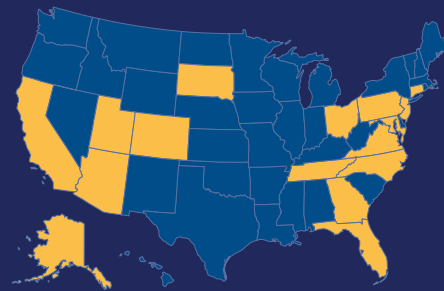
The State of Maryland removed degree requirements from 50% of its 38,000 jobs starting in March 2022.

The result?

34% year-over-year increase in STAR applicants in the first six months.



Since Maryland’s announcement, more states have followed suit by passing legislation or examining their hiring processes and requirements, including: **Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia.**



¹ *STARsPolicy – Opportunity@Work*. (2024, May 29). Opportunity@Work. <https://opportunityatwork.org/stars-policy-project/>

WHY THIS PROJECT AND WHY NOW?

Skills-based hiring has become a new approach for employers and has been **gaining ground**² as a hiring strategy over the last two years. Skills-based hiring eliminates bachelor degree requirements and focuses on identifying the skills that are required for a role and matching potential candidates who possess desired skills to these positions. While removing bachelor's-degree requirements for positions opens the doors to STARs, current hiring policies and procedures need to be addressed to ensure that the best candidate is found for a role.

The launch of ACCT's Skills-Based Hiring Initiative was an opportunity to address how community colleges could support skills-based hiring with public-sector employers as bachelor's-degree requirements are eliminated. STARs are a part of the solution and these individuals benefit from the reframing of a new hiring approach. Creating pathways for STARs and understanding who these individuals are is essential in setting them up for success.

Who are STARs?

Over 70 million workers are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) rather than through a traditional bachelor's degree. These individuals represent the full diversity of our workforce. STARs have experiences from an array of backgrounds, including but not limited to community college, military service, workforce-training programs, and bootcamps. Having developed valuable skills, STARs are defined as individuals who are at least 25 years old, are currently active in the workforce, and have a high school diploma. According to Opportunity@Work, "the barriers STARs face are not forces beyond our control. They are the sum of institutional and individual choices, choosing convenient shortcuts over consideration of skills."³ Removing the barriers that exist for STARs and implementing new hiring practices that are skills-based will provide a pathway for many individuals and an opportunity for employers to widen their pool of candidates.

Maryland removal of degree requirements from state positions

The initiative to eliminate the four-year college degree requirements from thousands of Maryland state jobs was a first-in-the-nation effort. Substituting relevant experience, training, and community college education for a bachelor's degree opens equitable access for STARs. Community colleges already play an important role in workforce development across the country. Enrolling nearly half of all college learners, community colleges are a gateway to higher education and skills building for learners. In understanding how community colleges can serve learners, ACCT launched a pilot program with four Maryland community colleges to create and/or enhance career pathways for STARs.

SCOPE OF PROJECT

The initial scope of the project was to demonstrate the effectiveness of skills-based hiring by designing and/or enhancing existing training programs at four community colleges around the critical skills most needed for specific occupations identified by the state, creating a pipeline of skilled and career-ready job candidates for open roles. To ensure everyone has access to a good job and the opportunity to achieve greater economic mobility, we must intentionally include STARs in our hiring. Therefore, our focus was on creating pathways for STARs to careers with the State of Maryland.

2 Agovino, T. (2024, April 8). *Skills-Based hiring is gaining ground*. SHRM. <https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/all-things-work/skills-based-hiring-new-workplace-trend#:~:text=This%20method%20for%20finding%20talent,be%20applied%20to%20the%20job>

3 Opportunity@Work. (2024.) *STARs Skilled Through Alternative Routes*. Opportunity@Work. <https://opportunityatwork.org/stars/>.



Pivot

Due to the challenges outlined below, we realigned our project outcomes to better reflect the realities encountered. During our initial conversations with the State of Maryland, we learned that the positions with the highest vacancy rates were corrections officers and direct-care assistants/trainees. In understanding the challenges that we were encountering and realizing that the timeline needed for the colleges to implement the curriculum modifications would not be sufficient, we determined that it would be best to focus on the creation of a Playbook for institutions that seek to establish partnerships with their state and local government agencies. Through our conversations with the state of Maryland and the community colleges, we learned that having a guiding resource which includes identifying champions, conducting a skills discovery, and including key data metrics can be very helpful in increasing the likelihood of training learners for state jobs.

CHALLENGES

Timing

Timing is a critical aspect of every project or new initiative. Whether understanding the timeline of the project, or when potential stakeholders are available, having a broad awareness of timing, availability, and receptiveness to a project will help in the progress and success of the project. Former Maryland Governor Larry Hogan's administration launched a state-wide initiative eliminating four-year degree requirements from thousands of state jobs in 2022. When ACCT and Opportunity@Work launched our project, it was at the start of the newly elected Governor Wes Moore administration and the change in administrations was underway. This change caused delays in getting to the correct stakeholders in the state of Maryland. The initiative eliminating four-year degree requirements was one of the last initiatives set forth by the prior administration. Our discussions with various state agencies found that many of the agencies were still working to identify positions whose degree requirements might be eliminated and still needed to conduct a thorough skills-discovery process to identify the skills that were required for open positions.

Partnerships/Identifying Champions

Identifying the champions and partners at the state of Maryland for this project was another challenge. The structure of hiring for each state government across the U.S. can vary. For Maryland, the hiring process is decentralized with each agency conducting their own hiring process, although all hire through a central job board. Through Maryland's job board, we were able to identify vacant positions that did not require four-year degrees. Additionally, we partnered with the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) at the state of Maryland to gather the necessary information about the hiring needs of the state. This partnership turned out to be beneficial as the team at DBM were the champions needed to continue to advance skills-based hiring with the state.

Removing Degree Requirements and Discovery Process

Conducting a thorough skills-discovery process is a key to creating a skills-based hiring approach and should be an early part of the process to identify the positions where degree requirements can be removed. We outline how to begin this process and how to conduct a skills discovery within the Playbook. At the beginning of the project, we believed that a full discovery process already had taken place with the state of Maryland; however, this was not the case. Over the course of this project, we have learned that the Department of Budget and Management has established a new project in collaboration with the 16 community colleges across the state to focus on skills-based hiring. While the removal of degree requirements prior to a full discovery process caused uncertainty with respect to how the degree removal would impact the hiring process, Maryland is now aligning with the local institutions to create career pathways for STARS through a skills-based hiring approach.



Understanding the Scope of Removing Degree Requirements

Removing degree requirements is only one step in creating more equitable hiring practices. Many hiring managers are accustomed to using degrees as a primary filter for candidates, and shifting to a skills-based approach requires a significant mindset change. There are legal and regulatory considerations to navigate, as well as the need to ensure that the changes do not inadvertently create new barriers for candidates. This is a challenge that will continuously need to be addressed to ensure that the changes that are being made to remove barriers do not unintentionally create new challenges or obstacles for individuals (e.g., onerous skill-validation assessments). Additionally, hiring managers can be great partners and key stakeholders in aligning a new skills-based hiring approach.

LESSONS LEARNED

Start Early to Identify Skills for Roles

One of the key lessons learned was the importance of starting the skills identification process early. By engaging with employers and hiring managers at the outset, individuals can gain a clear understanding of the specific skills required for each role. Prior to removing degree requirements, employers should look to partner with community colleges to leverage existing graduates and to support them in identifying and/or developing new programs that equip individuals with the skills needed for positions. Identifying the correct champions and stakeholders to conduct the skills-discovery process will help in understanding the specific skills needed for positions. Partners at the community college could come from the institution's workforce development team or from a particular program depending on the roles an employer is looking to hire. Starting early in identifying skills for roles and engaging community colleges allows employers to understand what skills are necessary in a given role and if training is needed prior to an individual starting. Leveraging the Playbook created through this project provides a direction that employers and community colleges can take to support career pathways.

Evaluating Candidates Via Skills


Evaluating candidates based on their skills rather than their degrees requires a shift in hiring practices. Hiring managers need to be trained in how to assess candidates' skills effectively and how to use new evaluation tools and techniques. Some of the critical steps in this process included:

- Clearly defining the skills required for each role.
- Training hiring managers on how to use these tools and interpret the results.
- Engaging community colleges early and often in the process, as they are well-positioned to develop and deliver training programs that meet employers' needs.

Community colleges are invaluable partners in this process. Their ability to quickly develop and adapt programs to meet the needs of employers is instrumental in the success of creating pathways for STARs. By involving community colleges from the beginning, creating training programs that are closely aligned with the skills required by state agencies, ensures a steady pipeline of qualified candidates.

MARYLAND POLICE AND CORRECTIONS TRAINING COMMISSIONS (MPCTC) AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF BALTIMORE COUNTY (CCBC)

Corrections-officer positions were identified as one of the more difficult positions to fill for the state of Maryland. A correctional officer is the entry-level position of custody, security, and supervision of adult inmates confined in a correctional facility. In an eagerness to learn more about the challenges, ACCT met with the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) and the Maryland Police and Corrections Training Commissions (MPCTC) to learn more about their partnership, challenges faced in retaining new recruits, and possible solutions.



Based on information from MPCTC, once a corrections-officer position is posted, candidates submit their applications and progress through the hiring process, which includes completing an assessment and background check, and then they receive an offer following successful completion of each step. Upon acceptance of the offer, candidates then enter the Academy to receive training facilitated by MPCTC in partnership with CCBC. The curriculum of the Academy is set by the state of Maryland and focuses on teaching a variety of policies and safety measures. Maryland sets the general regulations and requirements of the curriculum through the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) Title 12 Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. According to COMAR, the curriculum for correctional officers includes the following subject areas: administrative procedures; introduction to corrections; supervision, interpersonal relations, and treatment of inmates; security, custody, and control of inmates; and discipline of inmates. The Academy is seven weeks long and a new Academy begins every month. When a new recruit starts the Academy they are enrolled in the Corrections Entry Level Training Program (CELTP) and upon successful completion of the Academy, the individuals obtain the Corrections Professional Certificate through CCBC. During the Academy, individuals are required to have 75-hours in the field training, but only a few of those hours are within a correctional facility.

Challenges

One of the most significant challenges is getting new recruits past the one-year mark of employment. During the Academy, individuals learn a variety of policies and safety measures that are set by the state of Maryland. Through the course of the initial training, individuals receive five weeks of field training after the Academy, but once they finish this training new recruits are on their own in their positions. MPCTC stated that for some new recruits, “training is like catching a drop of water from a firehose because new recruits are learning a broad set of skills and lessons that are required for their role.” A primary focus during the Academy is ensuring that new recruits understand the policies and know how to stay safe while on the job. The limited timeframe during which new recruits receive training in a correctional facility is another challenge—one that possibly creates an incomplete understanding of the work during the training. There are various other challenges, such as language barriers, the average age of a recruit being 39 years old, limited career pathways, and successful completion of a background check during the hiring process. Nevertheless, managing through the first year of the job is critical. Both MPCTC and CCBC indicated that many new recruits come in with a skills gap. To succeed in their roles, correctional officers need to have skills that include but are not limited to interpersonal communications, problem solving, critical thinking, report writing, and reading comprehension.

Charting a New Course

Getting new recruits through their first year is a goal that MPCTC is striving towards. During the conversations with MPCTC and CCBC, we discussed possible solutions to support individuals throughout the first year and ensure that they have the necessary skills to be set up for success in their current roles and beyond. Following the Academy and initial training, the retention rates for new recruits decline until after the first year of employment. MPCTC indicated that correctional officers are more likely to stay in their positions, noting that retention rates stabilize when individuals remain after one year in the field. Addressing the current 56.58% vacancy rate for correctional officers (as of November 2023) within the state of Maryland will take well-planned steps and collaboration between established partners such as MPCTC and CCBC. While the curriculum for the Academy is set by the state and is not able to be adjusted at this time, the idea of providing supplemental training and professional-development courses to individuals during their first year was suggested during our discussions with MPCTC and CCBC. MPCTC informed us that providing support to these individuals during their first year could help with retention rates. Community colleges, like CCBC, could help with the creation of courses established to support new recruits during their first year. While the discussion relating to what these courses would entail is still underway, the focus would be on building the necessary skills that are current challenges for new recruits, such as report writing, interpersonal communications, and reading comprehension.



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