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## Community colleges answer employers' varying demands

Kansas City Business Journal - by [Morgan Chilson](#) Contributing Writer

The flexibility and responsiveness of area community colleges in adding and changing curriculum bolsters economic development, though at least one area expert would like to see more communication among business, K-12 and higher education institutions.

"Community colleges are so much more nimble in being able to respond and have really taken to heart their mission to graduate folks that are ready for the work force," said Keith Gary, director of program development at the **Kansas City Area Life Sciences Institute Inc.** "But there's really poor vertical integration with K-12, with higher education and with business. K-12 doesn't talk with higher ed; higher ed doesn't talk with business."

For example, Gary said he worked with Missouri on criteria for freshman-level courses. He was frustrated to see no businesspeople in the discussion.

Work force development must start young, he said, particularly in science. A **National Science Foundation** study found that 25 percent of biotechnology jobs are held by people with high school diplomas, he said.

KC Wired and KCALSI organized programs to introduce work force skills at the K-12 levels, Gary said, but there need to be more.

At the [University of Kansas Edwards Campus](#), the staff works with businesses to determine needs, Vice Chancellor Robert Clark said. Although he and his staff talk to economic development groups, they usually supply information rather than ask for it, Clark said.

One challenge in helping with economic development, Clark and others pointed out, is that four-year schools don't have the ability of community colleges to make rapid curriculum changes.

The Edwards mission statement focuses on work force development, but its role is different from that of community colleges, said Elaine Warren, director of public relations and a member of the Edwards academic program planning team.

Considering the link between economic development and curriculum made her realize the campus needs to invite more economic development people to sit in on committee meetings, she said.

Bill Osborn, dean of community outreach at [Johnson County Community College](#), said input from business leaders and economic development officials often directs curriculum decisions. JCCC routinely gets calls from the Kansas **Department of Commerce** asking what the college can offer companies interested in coming to the area, he said.

Four-year universities, though important to economic development and an economy's success, have more hoops to jump through.

"I think it's more of a difference in mission," Osborn said. "The mission of a community college is to be as nimble as possible and to be as responsive as possible because we have the length of program and the resources, both human and local funding streams, that allow us -- that compel us -- to be that way."

Thomas Burke, dean of Kansas City, Kan., Community College, said curriculum must adjust to the changing needs of the economy and to changing technology.

Responsiveness is key to the school's mission, he said. Most recently, it created a commercial driver's license program to meet the needs of **General Motors Corp.**

#### **Johnson County Community College center trains 1,000s, benefits area**

Johnson County Community College's curriculum is a frequently used resource for businesses and provides an incalculable economic benefit for the community.

Sally Winship, vice president of the Center for Business and Technology at JCCC, said the center has helped obtain \$106.6 million in Kansas Department of Commerce grants for businesses wanting to enhance their work forces.

In addition, the center is the state's largest re-licensure training center for health care workers, 3,000 of whom pass through the center every year to meet continuing education requirements.

The center also offers certification courses in computer science, banking, early childhood education and law for almost 10,000 professionals a year.

The Center for Business and Technology also is home to [Burlington Northern Railroad](#)'s national training program. Geri Christian, director of the program, said about 10,000 students from throughout the country attend training courses every year.

The students have accounted for an average of 50,000 room nights a year during the past five years at area hotels. Christian said the economic impact of the training center has been calculated at \$50 million a year.

#### **Phil LaCerte**

Morgan Chilson | Chilson is a freelance writer in the Kansas City area.