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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Essential Skills Program at the Community College of Denver (CCD), which functions as an education broker and a labor market intermediary that coordinates the services offered by CCD with the needs of a number of Department of Social Service clients. The Essential Skills Program (ESP) supplements the services offered by the college by providing a series of Life and Employment Skills and contributes to the Department of Social Services by assisting students in getting an internship as part of their training, and a job once their training is completed. ESP was designed in an effort to increase the job opportunities of welfare clients affected by Welfare-to-Work legislation. Core courses are designed to provide participants with work-related skills. ESP offers services to approximately 100 students per semester in 4 short-term, 4-month long educational tracks. The most successful program, the Financial Services track, with an average enrollment of 22 students per semester, has a 50% graduation rate, a 50% employment rate, and an average wage of \$9.40 an hour, the highest in the program. The other tracks are Early Childhood Education, Medical Instrument Technician, and Retail Sales. (Contains 22 references.)  
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# Making Connections to Jobs, Education, and Training: The Essential Skills Program of the Community College of Denver

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## **Summary**

The Essential Skills Program of the Community College of Denver functions as an education broker and a labor market intermediary that coordinates the services offered by the Community College of Denver, with the needs of a number of Department of Social Service clients. The Essential Skills Program supplements the services offered by the college by providing a series of Life and Employment skills. The program contributes to the work of the Department of Social Services by assisting students in getting an internship as part of their training, and a job once their training is completed.

The Essential Skills program offers services to approximately 100 students per semester in four short-term, four-month long educational tracks: Early Childhood Education, Financial Services, Medical Instrument Technician, and Retail Sales. These tracks were selected because they are in demand or because they offer chances for career advancement as determined by the Denver Workforce Initiative. About 90 percent of participants are placed in internships. By and large the most successful track is the Financial Services with an average enrollment of 22 students per semester, a 50 percent graduation rate, a 50 percent employment rate, and an average salary of \$9.40 an hour, the highest in the program. This track benefits from a partnership with Norwest Bank, where students conduct their financial services internships under the supervision of bank supervisors, who also act as mentors. An added bonus of this association is that the bank offers paid internships. In all cases, but one, Norwest hired these student interns upon their graduation from the program.

The Early Childhood Education track also enrolls 20 students per semester, graduating a little less than 50 percent of the students, with a similar percentage finding jobs in the field. The Medical Instrument Technician track enrolls twice as many students, 40 on average, but only 25 percent graduate and find jobs. The Retail Sales track enrolls an average of 14 students, 50 percent graduate but their success in finding a job is more limited, the 1998 class only had one graduate documented as employed.

## **Making Connections to Jobs, Education, and Training: The Essential Skills Program of the Community College of Denver**

### **1. Introduction**

The Essential Skills Program (ESP) at the Community College of Denver (CCD) was designed as an effort to increase the job opportunities of welfare clients, currently affected by the federal "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," Public Law 104-193, also known as the Welfare-to-Work Legislation. Thus, the Essential Skills Program provides a combination of education, training, employment, and support services necessary for participants to attain self-sufficiency in the context of career tracks currently in demand. The services that the program offers focus on the needs of clients that the Denver Department of Social Services (DDSS) defines as Almost Job Ready (Level II), and Marginally Job Ready (Level III). These services are designed to help clients reach the stage of job-readiness that will allow them to successfully obtain and maintain a stable job. Therefore, through a combination of classes, on-the-job internships, and case management, students develop the skills to make the adjustments in their personal lives needed to maintain a stable employment. These include dealing with child care and transportation issues or confronting personal barriers such as substance abuse and domestic violence. Students also develop an understanding of work culture and expectations, and acquire the essential literacy and vocational skills to perform specific job functions and advance along a career track.

The program, conceived as a ten-month effort, and divided in four phases, from the time of recruitment to that of post-grant full-employment for participants, is structured in such a way as to respond to the requirements of the social service system. The Department of Social Services

has the mandate to place 30 percent of its caseload in countable activities. Since vocational training is not considered in itself a countable activity, the program, by combining vocational training with a countable activity— a job internship conducted at a job site— takes the form of a “work-first” program. This arrangement allows case managers to report clients participating in the Essential Skills program as engaged in a countable activity.

Programmatically, clients are enrolled in the four-month long Essential Skills Certificate program, where they receive a number of core skills and vocational courses, which, depending on the vocational track can require from 16 to 29 credit hours, and a minimum of 22 hours of on-the-job training. Placement occurs in the second month. The certificate program allows for the participation of clients with limited English proficiency, who are enrolled in intensive English classes while working 22 hours a week. The vocational tracks offered by the program are in those fields most in demand in the Denver area: Financial Services, Early Childhood Education, Medical Instrumentation Technology, and Retail Sales.<sup>1</sup> The Financial Services track offers internships as bank tellers, an occupation in high demand in the Denver area. According to Beverly Fry, Human Resource Specialist at Norwest Bank, on average there are three bank teller positions opening per week at any of the Norwest Bank locations in the city of Denver.<sup>2</sup> Norwest Bank is one of the institutions collaborating with the program, and where most program participants enrolled in the Financial Service track conduct their internship or on-the-job training. On the other hand, there are jobs that are not in such high demand by employers but offer many opportunities for lateral moves or promotions. According to Elaine Baker, director of the Essential Skills Program, that is the case of the Medical Instrumentation Technology track,

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<sup>1</sup> The January 1999 Not Seasonally Adjusted Denver MSA information from the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment indicated that change in 1,000 from the previous year for the categories of Services, which include businesses and hospitals, and those for Trade were 10.3 and 11.1 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Beverly Fry, Human Resource Specialist for Norwest Bank. March 1999

for which there are only 24 positions opening per year, but those jobs allow for lateral moves and frequent promotions within a hospital.

During Phase I, the Essential Skills Program conducted a process of recruitment in cooperation with the Denver Department of Social Services. Information packets were sent to all TANF clients in the metropolitan Denver area along with their monthly checks. Candidates were interviewed and staff conducted pre-assessments, identification of barriers and problem solving skills. Clients accepted in the program were required to sign an Individual Responsibility Contract (IRC), which is a requirement of the Denver Department of Social Services. Once students enroll in the program they begin job-readiness activities. Essentially, students must then complete at least 12 credit hours of core coursework, which include a minimum of 6 credit hours of workplace core courses and at least 3 credits of cooperative work experience.

Core courses are courses designed to provide participants with work-related skills. The program offers two categories of core courses: Workplace Core Courses and Vocational Core Courses. Workplace Core Courses are designed to teach skills common to all vocational tracks, and focus on skills employees need to function successfully in the workplace. By teaching these courses the program attempts to address the need for flexibility required by clients unsure of their career paths. Since these skills can be transferred to any of the five vocational tracks, participants can choose a different vocational option without having to start the program again. These Workplace Core Courses may include reading, writing and communication in the workplace. Vocational Core Courses are designed to address the need for more specific competencies required to work in a particular field such as math for manufacturing or customer service for health care and services. The cooperative work experience provides a link between



vocational training and on-the-job performance. Since the Essential Skills Program is designed as a "Work-First" program, it uses the co-op units to coach and mentor students during work internships. The program requires a minimum of three co-op credits which can be fulfilled by Workplace Core or as Vocational Core courses. In addition, students must complete from 5 to 7 credit hours of vocational courses, for a month, before they start Phase II. There are also a number of elective courses that students can select under approval from their advisor, and based on students' career goals. (For a more detailed list of courses see Appendix I.)

During Phase II, which can last between three to six months depending on participants' needs, students start their internships. Students then spend 18 hours a week in class, where they receive a minimum of six credit hours of vocational training, and spend 22 hours a week at work. The vocational courses offered by the program include specific vocational competencies, workplace core competencies, and cooperative work experiences. The specific vocational competencies may include courses in Medical Terminology and Operating Room Assistance for those enrolled in the Medical Instrumentation track. The program also offers Business Math and Customer Service for those enrolled in the Financial Services track, and Introduction to Early Childhood Education and Early Childhood Education Lab for those enrolled in the Early Childhood Education track. The workplace competencies include Introduction to Computers, Workshops in Reading, Writing, and Speaking, and Communication for the Workplace. Some of the elective courses that students may take include The Sociology of Health Care, and Medical Emergencies. During this phase, the program also provides limited support services such as back-up childcare, professional style wardrobe, transportation assistance, and some counseling. Childcare is offered through cooperation with the Work and Family Resource Center, and professional clothing through cooperation with Tailored Transitions. The program assists

students with transportation by providing bus passes and helping students to develop transportation plans. For those students needing to confront issues of substance abuse and domestic violence, the program offers counseling through a cooperation agreement with Project WISE and by referrals to community agencies. Project WISE is a training program for counselors who do part of their clinical training through cooperation with the Essential Skills program. During Phase III clients work full time and ongoing vocational training continues twice a week in two-hour sessions. Phase IV is the post-grant, full-employment phase.

The development of the Essential Skills Program has benefited from previous experience and their current affiliation. First of all, the program benefits from the expertise of the director and some of the members of the staff, who participated in the Workplace Learning Project, an educational program based on the work-site. More recently the program director and some of her current staff participated in a pilot project conducted in March of 1997 in cooperation with the Denver Department of Social Services and Mile High Child Care. Finally, the program derives support from its affiliation with Denver Community College.

The Workplace Learning Project is a federally funded program administered by Denver Community College. The program was initiated in 1994, as a work-based learning initiative, and served over 1000 entry-level or newly hired employees with low basic skills, limited English proficiency, and limited employment opportunities. Elaine Baker, director of the Workplace Education Special Project is also the director of the Essential Skills Program. The implementation of the Essential Skills Program received a boost after the Community College of Denver, the Denver Department of Social Services (DDSS), and Mile High Child Care collaborated on a pilot welfare reform project based on the Essential Skills model whereby work and learning

modalities are integrated. According to Elaine Baker, the program developed procedures for ongoing communication with case managers, employment specialists, and DDSS personnel based on methods developed during the ten months duration of the pilot project, from March to December 1997.<sup>3</sup>

In turn, the Community College of Denver has earned a reputation for, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education, "accomplishing what many other two-year institutions are striving to do: recruit, retain, and graduate a diverse and under prepared urban population." According to the same report, "the community college provides one-third of all remedial instruction in the state's public institutions; nearly 60 percent of its students are in remedial classes. Moreover, degree-seeking students who take remedial courses at Denver are slightly more likely to graduate or transfer to a four-year college than their classmates who are not in remedial classes. Last year, 40 percent of students who had taken remedial courses graduated or continued their studies at other institutions after three years at the community college, compared with 39 percent of all students."<sup>4</sup>

The Community College of Denver (CCD) is one of 13 Community Colleges in the Colorado Community College and Occupational Education System governed by the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education. In terms of full-time enrolled students CCD is the largest college in the state system, with 4,038 full time students, from a total of 10,086 students enrolled in the 1997-1998 academic year. This student body is quite diverse, although white students are still a majority constituting 45 percent of the total, followed by 32 percent Hispanics, 13 percent African-American, 9 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 3 percent

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Essential Skills Program Director, Elaine Baker, March 1999.

International students, and 2 percent Native-American. These percentages are significant in a state that is about 88 percent white. The college reflects the greater ethnic diversity of the urban Denver area. There is also a larger enrollment of women in the college since they represent 59 percent of the student body.

Lastly, the Essential Skills Program's operational structure reflects the high level of inter-organizational cooperation. Central to the operation of the program is the role of the Track Coordinator. There are four Track Coordinators, one for each educational track, who work under the supervision of the program director. The track coordinator is possibly the person that students most identify with the program since they receive orientation from the coordinator and because they must report any problems or absences to the coordinator. The Track Coordinator can therefore advocate for particular students because of her familiarity with their circumstances. The Track Coordinator also negotiates and allocates job placements for the students and communicates on a weekly basis with on-the-job managers or supervisors regarding students' performances. At the level of interaction with the Denver Department of Social Services the track coordinators work with the case managers assigned by the DDSS to work with each track of the Essential Skills Program.

In essence, the Essential Skills program certifies to employers that its graduates do not only have the competencies necessary to function on the job but that they also have the attitudes and work habits employers expect from their work force. Further, employers know that for the duration of the program and the follow-up period their trainees have the support of program case managers as well as the support of case managers from the Department of Social Services.

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<sup>4</sup> Hebel, Sara. (1999) "Community College of Denver Wins Fans with Ability to Tackle Tough Issues." Chronicle of Higher Education. May 7, pp. A37-A38

By guaranteeing the preparedness of its graduates the program becomes part of the recruitment network of area employers and, at the same time, guarantees that graduates will find stable employment.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. Counseling and Support Services**

Some of the issues that the Essential Skills Program had to confront in the process of providing services to welfare clients were the low literacy rate of the clients and the multiple barriers that affect their attendance and performance. According to an assessment conducted by the program, many clients test between the sixth and eighth grade reading level. Clearly, this level of literacy limits their ability to pursue vocational training leading to stable employment. Clients also confront problems of childcare, transportation, substance abuse, domestic violence, and inadequate housing.

In order to deal with the low literacy of many participants the program combines job-related and vocational courses with developmental studies courses and strong academic counseling. To deal with personal barriers the program provides strong case management through contract with social services or by using social services at the college. The program also offers traditional "soft skills" training, such as problem solving. The participants of the Essential Skill Program also have access to all the support services offered at the Community College of Denver. Those services include the Academic Support Center, the Student Assistance Center and Women's Services, the Center for Persons with Disabilities, the Career Services, the Work and Family Resource Center, the Educational Opportunity Center, and the Career Development Center.

### **Academic Support and Advisement**

In order to deal with the low literacy of many participants the program, which has been reported between the sixth and eighth grade reading level, the Essential Skills Program combines vocational or job-related courses with developmental studies courses and strong academic counseling. As part of the Workplace Core coursework participants are required to take the program has included a series of workshops in reading, writing, and speaking specifically adapted to the workplace. According to the course description, "(t)his course introduces participants to basic reading, writing, and speaking skills necessary for the workplace. The course focuses on understanding work-related communication such as memos and business letters, company policies, technical/operator manuals, speaking in front of a group, and interviewing and presentation techniques...This course will also concentrate on critical-thinking skills."<sup>6</sup>

The participants of the Essential Skill Program also have access to all the support services offered at the Community College of Denver. Those services include the Academic Support Center, where students can receive some tutorial services and mentoring in Math, English reading, ESL, and the particular subjects related to their vocational track.

### **Support to Students' Personal Circumstances**

Early on, the program identified the personal circumstances that affect the clients they were attempting to serve and that stood in the way of clients performing at an acceptable level and completing a vocational training program. These barriers that affect attendance and performance include the lack of reliable childcare and transportation, substance abuse and

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of training programs as recruitment networks for employers see Meléndez, E. (1996). Working on Jobs: The Center for Employment Training. Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy.

domestic violence difficulties, and inadequate housing conditions. The support that the Essential Skills Program provides to participants takes two forms. Many services are provided through the Student Assistance Service and Women's Service at the Community College of Denver, while more specific ongoing issues necessitating regular interaction are negotiated with the assistance of volunteers from Project WISE. Through Project WISE the Essential Skills Program was able to set up an eight-week problem-solving course for program participants. Project WISE also provided limited health services that included crisis counseling and support groups.

According to Benita J. Olivas, director of the Student Assistance Center and Women's Center, who meets with each student served by the Center, there are approximately 40 to 60 TANF students out of the 260 students she interviews. The Center is open to all students and on average it serves 260 students per year. She feels that approximately half are TANF clients. She identifies many of the students her office assist as single parents, displaced homemakers, and general students. Some of the problems she most commonly encounters are difficulties to fulfill basic needs, the need for child care, domestic abuse, commonly from a partner who does not want the student to attend school, and parenting issues. The Center offers case management, refers students to the Career Center, where students can get assistance writing resumes, and helps students to develop a portfolio consisting of registration documentation, letters of recommendation, and other assorted documentation of the student's academic life.

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<sup>6</sup> Baker, Elaine. (1997). Express Certificate Proposal for a New Post Secondary Vocational Technical Education Program. December 1997.

### **3. Pedagogy and Curriculum**

The Essential Skills Program tries to match the needs of the students with the expertise and sensitivity of the instructors. Elaine Baker, director of the Essential Skills Program, selects the instructors based on their level of expertise and sensitivity to dealing with non-mainstream students, in this case characterized as low-income underprivileged welfare clients. Ms. Baker argues that vocational programs offered by the community college are adequate at providing vocational resources but are lacking in other areas. She opined that since the needs of immigrant or low-income underprivileged students is different from the needs of mainstream populations, in order to be effective, programs designed to serve these populations need to be concerned with instructors' expectations and sensitivity. As a result, she conducts extensive interviews with prospective faculty in an effort to determine their skill level in working with the type of students that come to the program. She has found that, interestingly enough, some of the instructors she has hired who have been the most successful had a background in bilingual education.

The Essential Skills Program also tries to negotiate the pressure that participants have to engage in work-related activities. The program, therefore, offers short-term, four-month long instruction with "regular and frequent start up dates for programs," which run counter to the much longer semester system offered by the college. It is for this reason, however, that sometimes the program encounters additional difficulties. For instance, since one of the regulations affecting medical instrumentation technologist required graduates to have a high school diploma or equivalent, which many participants lacked, the program proposed to enroll participants in ongoing GED courses already offered by the college. That effort proved fruitless because of scheduling and administrative conflicts and the program had to resort to setting up its own GED classes.



## **Competencies**

The curriculum of the Essential Skills Program is divided in two components: Core skills and vocational skills. Core skills are competencies common to all vocational tracks and are classified in the program curriculum as Workplace Core Courses. These skills allow employees to function successfully in the workplace. On the other hand, vocational skills are the specific job competencies participants need to function successfully in a particular job. An example of a core skill course is COM 290 Communication for the Workplace. This is a 2-credit class that meets for three hours once a week. In this class, participating students learn to build interpersonal work relations through communication. The class is taught experientially, that is, the class tries to focus on connecting everyday experience to events in the workplace. It also focuses on observing oral communication and non-verbal cues. One of the instructors for this class, Betty Smith, has had experience teaching Interpersonal Communications at different levels, and in the past has done corporate training, worked in the court system, and worked with AFTC clients. She is an adjunct faculty for the college and had previously worked with the Workplace Learning Project. She also directs the Weekend College, a non-traditional learning program sponsored by the Community College of Denver Division of Continuing Education.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the Community College of Denver contributes to the program by providing the instructors for the vocational courses. According to Ms. Baker, it is in these cases where the program sometimes encounters difficulties matching the needs of the students with the expertise and sensitivity of the instructors. She opined that in some cases typical instructors were ill prepared to work with non-mainstream students. In other cases, there is an issue of expectations, where instructors do not feel that students are prepared to handle the level of instruction. She gave the example of the Early Childhood Program faculty leadership who

expressed concern regarding students' ability to complete the training program. According to program director Elaine Baker, a very important issue in that case was how to teach classes effectively so as to not change the competencies but to facilitate the process of learning. According to Communication for the Workplace instructor Betty Smith, the essential difference between mainstream students and TANF students is that of academic expectations. She argues that since TANF students have not been in school for a while, they need more structure and to practice classroom activities much more through more extensive homework.

### **Context Learning**

The Essential Skills Program is designed as a certificate program focused on enhancing participants' job-related skills within a short time and therefore it must contextualize the training students receive. Workplace Core Courses, such as COM 290 Communication for the Workplace, are constructed so students can relate everyday experience to events in the workplace. Similarly, Vocational Core Courses need to prepare students to perform in their internships one month after they start the program. Therefore, by necessity, all classes maintain a focus on the workplace. All tracks offer job coaching through cooperative work experience. The Early Childhood Profession track in particular includes a lab that gives students the opportunity to observe and record children's behavior under supervision. This orientation of the program, however, is not only a necessity but also a choice. For instance, the Early Childhood Education track has arranged to have students take CPR, First Aid, and Universal Precautions. Although these courses are not part of the package offered through the Community College of Denver,

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Betty Smith, instructor of the Essential Skills Program, March 1999.

they are offered to enhance clients' employability, but also to "hook in" potential students to their career training.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. Program Design**

##### **Block Scheduling, Shorter Classes**

One of the challenges the Essential Skills Program had to confront when developing a training schedule for welfare clients, was the inadequacy of the semester system offered by the college. Since the time limitations imposed by the Welfare-to-Work legislation require that participants be engaged in countable activities the program was structured around short-term, four-month long course instruction that includes job placement in internships that begin the second month of the program. Another way to deal with the time constraints experienced by the target population, reportedly of 25,000 adults, 15,000 of which are considered hard-to-serve, is to offer programs that have frequent start up dates.<sup>9</sup> For instance, clients interested in the Early Childhood Education Career track could start in January, again in June, or in August. The staggered nature of the tracks allows students who have to withdraw or who, for whatever reason, fall behind on the material, to return to the program. This was already the case for three students enrolled in the Early Childhood Education track who had to withdraw for health reasons. All three students planned to return to the program in August.

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the impact of contextualized training program see Meléndez, E. (1996). Working on Jobs: The Center for Employment Training. The Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy

<sup>9</sup> Leib, Jeffrey. "Program Helps Women Make Transition from Welfare to Work." The Denver Post Online.

[Http://www.denverpost.com/news/welfare7.htm](http://www.denverpost.com/news/welfare7.htm)

## **Program for Hispanics**

The Essential Skills Program was not designed to serve the needs of Hispanic clients specifically. The program was designed to focus, in accordance with the new welfare reform legislation, on the non-traditional student who needs to acquire basic job skills and vocational training before he or she becomes ineligible to receive public assistance. The city of Denver, however, with a population of 504,704 individuals, is the home of 107,382 Hispanics or almost 25 percent of the total population. Approximately 13,000 Hispanic families earned less than \$15,000 in 1990 and 32,100 Hispanics were reported living below the poverty level in 1989. Hispanics in Denver also experience a low educational attainment. In the year 1990, only 14,657 (close to 15 percent) of Hispanics had a high school diploma or equivalent, only 1,990 (1.9 percent) had earned an Associate's degree and 2,606 (2 percent) had a Bachelor's degree.<sup>10</sup> In Colorado 35.6 percent of welfare recipients are Hispanic. Therefore we may expect a high participation of Hispanics in entry-level training programs.

According to Elaine Baker, director of the program, recruitment is conducted without regard to racial background. However, she remarked that, although the composition of each track or each cohort was different, generally the Financial Services and Early Childhood Education tracks had a large percentage of Latinos while there were many more African American students interested in the Medical Instrumentation Technology track. In fact, during our visit to one of the Financial Services classes, I noticed that, of that day's attendance of 14 students, there were 13 Latinos and one African American student. At this point, however, it is difficult to speculate to what degree a more racially targeted program design could have been beneficial or deleterious to the success of the participants. Our preliminary observations and conversations with program staff

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<sup>10</sup> USA Counties. Denver County, Colorado. <http://govinfo.library.orst.edu>

indicate that there was a high level of comradeship and cooperation among participants regardless of their ethnic or national background.

### **Dedicated vs. Integrated Programs**

The structure of the Essential Skills Program combines some of the features of dedicated programs and some of the features of integrated programs. It resembles dedicated programs in that its existence is financed through a grant, and does not depend on the university for support, in that the students receive instruction at a different location from the college campus. In addition, the program director can recruit and hire instructors for the core courses that are trained or have experience working with non-traditional students. Students receive instruction at a location donated by the Housing Authorities, because of limited space on the campus, but also in order to maintain group cohesion and to keep students focused on employment. Further, the program established relations with local employers and with the Department of Social Services with which it negotiated cooperative agreements.

The program resembles an integrated program in that it falls under the jurisdiction of the Division of Continuing Education, although, the program director negotiates services provided by the college with the Vice President of Instruction. The program also staffs its vocational courses with instructors from several college divisions, and program participants receive a number of services, ostensibly, the case management, through the Student Assistance Center and Women's Services. To be sure, there seems to be an interest on the part of the college to integrate many of these services under one umbrella, and to centralize organization and instruction. At the same time, there seemed to be an interest in the part of the Mayor's Office to replicate the efforts of the program, by utilizing its best features.

While it is difficult to determine what would be the future of the Essential Skills Program, or if the college is capable of making the package of services widely available, what is certain is that the relative success of the program has captured the attention of several interested parties.

## **5. Career Ladders**

Another challenge to employment identified by the Essential Skills Program was the employers' attitudes regarding hiring clients with "social service" issues, that is, employers' reluctance to hire employees who were also confronting multiple barriers to employment such as low literacy, housing issues, child care needs, or were battling substance abuse. As a response, the program designated a college contact, ostensibly the track coordinator, as the employer liaison and set up relationships with supervisors to deal with these kind of issues. Overall, the program has been rather successful at establishing cooperative relations with many area employers, in particular with those where students conduct their internships. While this report discusses more in depth the cooperation between the program and Norwest Bank, the program also works with several daycare centers through the Denver area where students enrolled in the Early Childhood track conduct their on-the-job training. Similarly, students enrolled in the Medical Instrument Technologist track conduct their internships at St. Joseph's Hospital, Kaiser Permanente, Columbia Rose Medical Center, or Children's Hospital, among others. Students enrolled in the Retail Sales do their internships at area department stores such as Foley's, Dillard's, and the Downtown Pavilion Center.

Another concern of the Essential Skills Program has to do with the career potential of each track. Students are encouraged to continue taking classes after graduation from the certification program. Most vocational core courses taken as part of the program can matriculate to

Associate degree programs offered at the Community College of Denver. For instance, according to Dr. Orlando Griego, Dean of Educational and Academic Services at the college, students enrolled in the Early Childhood Education track can move from Childcare Assistant to Group Leader after taking 16 more credit hours and completing 1395 hours of work experience. Further courses can lead to an Associate's degree in General Studies and the possibility to transfer to a four-year institution. Professionally, the track allows for further advancement contingent on education and experience. Similarly, the financial track allows for some upward mobility in a sales position or a managerial role. The Medical Instrument Technician training can allow participants to move into LPN training. The Retail Sales tracks also provide some potential for upward mobility as a department manager or buyer.

### **Links Between Program, College, and Industry**

The Essential Skills program offers services to approximately 100 student per semester in four educational tracks. By and large the most successful track is the Financial Services with an average enrollment of 22 students per semester, a 50 percent graduation rate, a 50 percent employment rate, and an average starting salary of \$9.40 an hour for graduates of the program who complete their internship successfully. This track benefits from a partnership with Norwest Bank, where students conduct their financial service internships. Norwest support for the participants of the Essential Skills Program enhances participants' chances for success. Norwest, in fact, facilitated the development of the financial track of the Essential Skills program as a response to the high turnover rate for tellers. Unofficially, Beverly Fry, Human Resource Specialist at Norwest, estimated that there were three teller positions opened per week. Average salary for a teller is between \$8 to \$9. She explained that the high turnover among bank tellers is the result of a variety of factors. Those factors include Colorado's low

unemployment rate, the level of responsibility required from tellers, for a task that requires many skills but that can be monotonous, and that is not extremely well-remunerated. As of 1997, the Colorado unemployment rate was reported in the media as 3.2 percent while the 1998 Colorado Annual Average Labor Force Data indicates that the unemployment level for the city of Denver was 4.1 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Faced with the challenge of establishing a pool of reliable workers, Norwest found advantageous the proposition of forming a collaborative partnership with the Essential Skill Program at the Community College of Denver.<sup>12</sup> The structure of the partnership, developed by program director Elaine Baker, and Norwest Bank's Beverly Fry and Nadia Younes, director of Diversity Initiatives, allows for a division of labor with regard to services. From the program, clients receive training (core and vocational courses), academic support (tutorial and remedial courses), and case management (referrals to community agencies that help students deal with issues such as family violence, or substance abuse). The program also provides orientation for bank managers who are supervising trainees at the job sites and who are encouraged to take the role of mentoring students. In turn, the bank supports the program by providing paid internships and by encouraging supervisors in their roles as mentors. The paid internships are not a company decision, but a mandate in the banking industry that affects all banks in Colorado. Norwest, however, compensates the managers with a bonus for the level of teller retention in the crew that they supervise.

Norwest's commitment to the program was probably enhanced by the program's flexible structure that allows ownership by the participating institution. For starters, this track, although

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<sup>11</sup> Colorado Labor Force Averages for 1998. <http://lmi.cdle.state.co.us>

<sup>12</sup> Mountain News. Feb. 1999 (Monthly publication for Wells Fargo in Colorado and Utah).



very much a part of the Essential Skills Program, was renamed the "Norwest Bank Colorado's WINGS (Winning Independence Nurtures Greater Strength)" program. Beverly Fry and Nadia Younes, Norwest's Human Resource Specialist and director of diversity initiatives, respectively, were instrumental in the structuring of the track, including renaming the program at the bank. In fact, the February 1999 issue of the *Mountain News*, a monthly publication of the Norwest Bank produced for employees features the success of "their" program. While the article describes the cooperative nature of the venture, it highlights the role that Norwest played in its development. Further, Norwest also expressed its commitment to the students through a series of events. During the first week of the program the company organized a welcoming event for students, to recognize their presence and welcome them as an important and intrinsic part of the work of Norwest. In addition, Norwest provided free backpacks and key chains for the students. This approach made students feel welcome and part of the company. Perhaps, the biggest difference to students' life was the paid internships. The paid internship is a regulation that affects all banks in Colorado and therefore it is not a policy specific to Norwest Bank. Nevertheless, a paid internship made all the difference to unemployed students and those receiving public assistance, not only financially but also in terms of the students' self-esteem. This approach seems to work well for the bank. According to Christy Bonham, a Norwest manager for line tellers with 6 years of experience at the bank, students doing their internship through the WINGS program exhibited a higher level of loyalty to the bank. She feels that there is not that much of a difference in terms of the training and supervision given to participants of the WINGS program in comparison to other trainees. The only caveat, she expressed, was that perhaps, WINGS participants needed more of a one-to-one interaction.

Martha Masko is an instructor at CCD and, as the coordinator of the finance track, she is the person who communicates with bank managers on a weekly basis regarding students' performance. She is also the person who is called upon when there is a problem with any of the participating students since she acts as college liaison. She feels that one of the differences between WINGS program participants and other trainees is the level of confidence asking questions. She opined that one of the issues for program participants is to develop a sense of what to ask. Coordinator Martha Masko commented that this difficulty asking questions is part of an overall issue regarding communication skills, something the program tries to address through its communication classes. She finds that it is common for participating students not to distinguish between ways of communicating with friends and the type and manner of communication appropriate in a job environment. Norwest Human Resource Specialist Beverly Fry concurs in this observation and related an episode of a student using slang and curse words during an interview. She was of the opinion that students then needed to be coached in developing interview skills.

### **Hot Programs**

The Community College of Denver offers a series of programs to its mainstream population, but it considers the Computer Training for Persons with Disabilities program, the Nursing program, and the program in Computer Information hot programs, that is the programs that have the highest demand in the local labor market. Graduates of these programs are often hired as soon as they graduate. The Essential Skills Program also offers programs that are in demand in the local economy. Those program are the Early Childhood Education, Financial Services, Medical Instrument Technician, and Retail Sales. According to Beverly Fry, Human Resource Manager at Norwest, the teller position can be an entry point for a career in banking and a position that is

high in demand. She indicated that depending on training, the next steps for a person interested in pursuing a banking career could be that of Customer Service Representative, first, or Underwriter Assistant. Both jobs pay in the \$25,000 a year range. She is confident that employees can advance within the rank of the bank to a management role. She is encouraged by Norwest commitment to the development of its workforce. Further, there was a sense, shared at many levels of the college, that because of the low unemployment and expansion of the economy all programs were hot. The same feeling seemed to be shared by social service agencies and local businesses. Elroy Kelzenber, deputy director of employment and training for Arapahoe County's community services department, is quoted in a recent article as saying: "(j)obs are not the problem; there are lots of jobs, the issue is whether or not there are enough childcare opportunities or enough dollars to provide training to meet employer demands."<sup>13</sup> The same article indicates that according to economists, the Colorado workforce will grow by 50,000 jobs, providing "opportunities for those interested in exchanging a welfare check for a paycheck."

## **6. University/College/Program Leadership**

Universally and regardless of their position in the university, individuals we interviewed recognized the role of program director Elaine Baker as one of the leaders regarding innovation of services for non-mainstream populations. Dr. Barbara Bollmann, Vice President of Instruction, for instance, recognized the role played by Ms. Baker, even before the creation of the current program by discussing her participation in The Workplace Learning Project, a federally funded program administered by Denver Community College. The program, initiated in 1994 as a work-based learning initiative, served over 1000 entry-level or newly hired employees with low basic

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<sup>13</sup> Leib, Jeffrey. "Program Helps Women Make Transition from Welfare to Work." The Denver Post Online. [Http://www.denverpost.com/news/welfare7.htm](http://www.denverpost.com/news/welfare7.htm)

skills, limited English proficiency, and limited employment opportunities. The current effort, the Essential Skills Program, benefits from the experiences garnered through the Workplace Learning Project.

Dr. Bollman also underscored the role of college president, Dr. Byron McCleaney, who is on the board of the Welfare-to-Work legislation, and who has consistently, she explained, maintained a commitment to serve TANF clients. In fact, Dr. McCleaney is mentioned favorably in a recent Chronicle of Higher Education article, where he is credited for some of the changes taking place at the college, particularly the efforts by the college to reach poor and minority students.<sup>14</sup>

## **7. State Welfare-to-Work Legislation**

The Colorado Welfare-to-Work Program dated June 1998 describes the overall state and local targeting strategies to reach the hard-to-employ TANF recipients eligible under Welfare-to-Work.<sup>15</sup> This strategy consists of a full coalition effort from the Colorado's Departments of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and Human Services (DHS), the 63 county departments of social services, and the nine Private Industry Councils (PICs)/Service Delivery Areas (SDAs) with their developing regional One-Stop Career Center Systems. The joint goal of this cooperative endeavor will be to enhance and expand the successful foundations of both the TANF and JTPA programs into a viable Welfare-to-Work program. This, in turn, will intensify and strengthen the current partnerships that these agencies maintain with virtually all other organizations (public and private) dedicated to providing employment services, workforce development and training.

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<sup>14</sup> Hebel, Sara.(1999). Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Most of the information in this section comes from the Annual State Plan Under Section 403(a)(5) of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Block Grant Welfare-to-Work Formula Grant, for the period of Fiscal Year 1997-1998.

In Colorado, both TANF and workforce development activities are decentralized and administered at the local level to provide as much flexibility as possible in service design and delivery. TANF is administered at the county level. Regional Workforce Development Boards (RWDBs) and/or Private Industry Councils (PICs), which are transitioning into RWDBs, administer workforce development activities, including JTPA and employment programs. As part of the state's three-year transition into a One-Stop environment, the existing nine Service Delivery Areas (SDAs) will be subdivided into eighteen autonomous workforce development regions. Since the initial focus will be to identify those welfare recipients determined to be hard-to-employ, the local TANF agency will expeditiously provide the appropriate SDA/PIC with all assessment data and the Individual Responsibility Contract (IRC) for each person. In turn, each Service Delivery Area will contact those identified, in writing, and provide them with information concerning the nearest Welfare-to-Work program and office. Each SDA/PIC, in coordination with their county social service partner, will develop a local marketing strategy with goals designed to directly recruit eligible participants and to inform the entire local workforce development network of the Welfare-to-Work program. To assure that appropriate activities and services are provided toward the goal of achieving self-sufficiency for participants, each Service Delivery Area will plan and design activities with input from the state and local workforce development network, labor organizations, employers, job seekers, public sector agencies, local elected officials, and education/training providers.

In an effort to maximize local flexibility, the state of Colorado will encourage the Service Delivery Areas or Private Industry Councils to consider and apply all allowable activities authorized under this grant. Allowable activities include job readiness activities and job placement services financed through job vouchers and contracts with public or private

providers; employment activities that include community service or work experience programs, job creation through employment wage subsidies, and on-the-job training. Allowable activities also include post-employment services such as basic education skills, occupational skills training, ESL, or mentoring, and job retention and support services that are provided after an individual is placed in another allowable activity. Job retention services are also allowable activities if and when they are provided after an individual is placed in a job readiness activity. Job retention services include transportation assistance, substance abuse treatment, although Welfare-to-Work funds can not be used to provide medical treatment, childcare assistance, and emergency or short term housing assistance.

Since the current JTPA program has similar activities, Service Delivery Areas (SDA/PIC) will use the existing delivery system framework in planning and documenting local strategies. Each SDA/PIC will design and define, and the State will review, employment activities with a focus on enhancing the individuals' abilities to work and learn the skills necessary to stay in the workforce, to advance in a career, and to embrace lifelong learning as a means to self-sufficiency. These activities will emphasize a "work first" approach by focusing attention to services available after the individual begins work rather than delaying their entry into the workforce by promoting services that occur prior to employment. To promote opportunities for success for both the individual and the employer, employment activities will be planned with local employers' input, keeping in mind that the goal for each client is unsubsidized employment.

Regional Workforce Development Boards are mandated to encourage optional local provisions such as Job readiness activities that include training for individuals starting their own business.

Job readiness activities are restricted to six weeks, only four of which can be consecutive. Within that time frame, however, optional activities may include training in topics such as business plan development, the techniques of researching funding sources and applying for a small business loan, customer service training, and the basic skills needed to set up and operate a small business. Post-employment services do not have to be limited to the examples provided in the federal regulations. Regional Boards are encouraged to examine the supportive employment model utilized by disability-related programs and develop a holistic approach that goes beyond basic educational and occupation skills training, ESL and mentoring. Transportation services should not be limited to individual reimbursement of transportation costs.

The Colorado's Department of Labor and Employment, which is responsible for the State JTPA program, has been designated as the State Welfare to Work Administrative Agency. The Colorado Welfare-to-Work program will be implemented in coordination with the State Department of Human Services, the PICs/RWDBs and many other state and local agencies, using the existing JTPA structure of nine Service Delivery Areas. Colorado's Service Delivery Area for the city of Denver is the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training, and its budget for the Fiscal Year 1997-98 was \$2,142,794.36. In terms of expenditure of funds the local Welfare-to-Work planning guide requires that at least 70 percent of funds are to be expended on hard-to-employ individuals and administrative cost must be maintained at a 13.25 percent limit.

According to Ms. Elaine Baker, at the state level the system is driven by what they define as what is allowable and what is accountable. Therefore the Essential Skills Program needed to conform to their definition of those two concepts. The Essential Skills Program is able to provide on-the-job training as part of the services it offers and therefore case workers at the state level

are able to report participants as engaged in allowable and accountable activities. She feels that one of the alternatives that compete with their ability to offer training is also the system of Diversion. The system of Diversions allows the state to provide a client with an amount of up to \$2,000 with the requirement that they do not apply for public assistance for the next six months. Several counties, including the city of Denver use this system of Diversions.

## **8. Outcomes**

The Essential Skills program offers services to approximately 100 students per semester in four educational tracks: Early Childhood Education, Financial Services, Medical Instrument Technician, and Retail Sales. These tracks were selected because they are in demand or because they offer chances for career advancement. About 90 percent of participants are placed in internships. By and large the most successful track is the Financial Services with an average enrollment of 22 students per semester, a 50 percent graduation rate, a 50 percent employment rate, and an average salary of \$9.40 an hour, the highest in the program. This track benefit from their partnership with Norwest Bank, where students conduct a financial services internships under the supervision of bank supervisors, who also act as mentors. An added bonus of this association is that the bank offers paid internships. In all cases, but one, Norwest hired these student interns upon their graduation from the program. The Early Childhood Education track also enrolls 20 students per semester, graduating a little less than 50 percent of the students, with a similar percentage finding jobs in the field. The Medical Instrument Technician track enrolls twice as many students, 40 on average, but only 25 percent graduate and find jobs. The Retail Sales track enrolls an average of 14 students, 50 percent graduate but their success in finding a job is more limited, the 1998 class only had one graduate documented as employed.



## **Employment Rates and Relations to Employers**

The links between the Essential Skills Program and local employers occur at different levels and in different instances. At the structural level, the program is designed to provide an internship component, which brings students in contact with prospective employers. The success of the program in placing graduates is linked to its ability of to work with local industry partners to determine their needs in terms of employees' training and to earn their trust by guaranteeing the skills and reliability of graduates. In so doing the Essential Skills Program becomes part of the recruiting network for local employers. For starters the program's developing team consist of a number of academic and human service agencies such as the Coordinator of the Surgical Technology Program at the Community College of Denver, and the Education, Training and Employment Coordinator for the Denver Department of Social Services. The developing team also includes members of the local business community such as the Education Coordinator for Mile High Child Care and the President of Intertech Plastics. In fact, Noel Ginsburg, president of Intertech Plastics Inc, has been featured in a newspaper article as a local manufacturer playing an active role helping to move people off welfare. His company runs an in-house training and developing program in collaboration with the Community College of Denver to upgrade the skills of entry-level workers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Leib, Jeffrey. "Program Helps Women Make Transition from Welfare to Work." The Denver Post Online. [Http://www.denverpost.com/news/welfare7.htm](http://www.denverpost.com/news/welfare7.htm)

The most recent data generated by the Denver Department of Human Services and available June 1999 outlines the accomplishments of the Essential Skills program in relations to employment rates. Essentially, out of 99 participants 90 percent were placed in internships and 66 percent have been placed in unsubsidized employment with an average wage of \$8.34. Although not yet available, the placement outcome for the second group seems to be somewhat higher. This information seems to neatly correspond to the optimism expressed by program staff and some of the business partners such as Norwest Bank.

## **9. Conclusion**

The experience of the Essential Skills Program clearly set the stage for an understanding of the elements that can make a program successful. On the one hand, they point to the need to integrate a series of services that address the most important issues affecting the life of welfare clients. Thus, the program combines life and job skills courses with vocational classes designed to overcome the educational barriers that have long kept clients from getting the training they needed. By, as much as possible, selecting instructors who are sensitive or who have experience working with non-mainstream underprivileged students, the director of the program tries to respond to the particular academic needs of this population. At the same time, the program offered case management in order to overcome the personal barriers to employment, such as childcare, transportation, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

Ostensibly, the purpose of this program was to assist welfare client in their efforts to get stable employment. The program therefore set up cooperative agreements with area employers to develop internships for program participants. Internships allowed students to receive on-the-job training, and in some cases a salary, while they allow the employers to see first hand the

performance of prospective employees. At the end of the training, there was the expectation that a high percentage of graduates could be employed in a stable job that offered the possibility of advancement. By so doing the program is therefore affecting the supply-side and the demand-side of the labor-market.<sup>17</sup> Overall the program had mixed success. To the extent that the needs and interest of the students, the program, and the employer matched, each particular educational track was more or less successful. In the case of the financial track, where the needs of the employer matched what the program had to offer and the commitment of the employer seemed exemplary, the program met its most significant success. During the first semester of operation, in the Fall of 1998, the program enrolled 22 students per semester, and experienced a 50 percent graduation rate, a 50 percent employment rate, and graduates earned an average salary of \$9.40 an hour, the highest average in the program. Interviews with bank administrator and line teller supervisors indicate their satisfaction with the training and enthusiasm about the second group of interns. In fact, both bank administrators and program staff indicated that the second group benefited from an institutional learning process. At the time of our interviews program staff seemed more confident with the training they were providing and bank personnel seemed more satisfied with the training and disposition of the trainees.

Although limited, the success of the program points clearly in the direction that programs intended to serve non-mainstream populations must take. First, they must offers a comprehensive array of services that address the multiple barriers experienced by non-mainstream students. Secondly, there is a need to re-think the methods and educational approaches utilized with mainstream population. While there is little flexibility in the nature and

extend of the competencies necessary to succeed in the job market of today, there is much to be done at the level of methodology and pedagogy. Finally, one of the most important elements in designing programs for non-traditional students is employer participation. While the efforts of Norwest bank are exemplary, the program was beneficial to the stability of its work force. By opening their doors to program participants the bank secured in the program a partner in the training and retention of a number of employees. This partner is enlisted to offer case management of trainees and thus ensured that the retention efforts of the bank are reinforced. As a result of the cooperation, the bank gets trainees who are supported by the program, receiving a variety of services by the bank, who are receiving vocational training by the college, and who are more willing to remain working at the bank for a longer period of time. In turn, the students partake from an institution that values their presence and is willing to provide on-the-job training. This program certainly makes a difference to the students, and can be an invaluable asset when instituted in a much larger scale either at the college level, through a community based organization or at the state level through the department of social services. To be sure, the Community College of Denver and the Denver Department of Social Services have noticed the successes of the program and seem to be interested in developing their own program based on the lessons of the Essential Skills Program.

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of programs that address supply-side and demand-side of the labor market see Meléndez, E. (1996). Working on Jobs: The Center for Employment Training. The Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy.

## **Individuals Interviewed.**

Elaine Baker. CCD Workplace Education Special Projects Director. Essential Skills Program Director.

Beverly Fry. Norwest Bank, Human Resource Specialist

Barbara Bollmann. CCD Vice President for Instruction

Christy Bonham. Norwest, Line Teller Manager

David L. Ford. Senior Planner. Denver One Stop Career Center. Mayor's Office of Employment and Training.

Martha Masko. CCD instructor. Finance Track Coordinator

Dr. Orlando Griego. CCD Dean of Educational and Academic Services.

Benita J. Oliva. CCD Director of Student Assistance Center and Women's Services. 303-556-2343

Bill Molitor. City and County of Denver. Department of Social Services. Case Manager  
Employment Specialist.

Betty Smith. CCD Instructor of Communications. Early Childhood Education and Financial Services tracks

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## Appendix A

### Workplace Core Courses

CIS 105	Introduction to the PC	1 credit
BTE 101	Keyboarding I	4 credits
REA 105	Workshop in Reading, Writing, and Speaking	3 credits
COM 290	Communication for the Workplace	2 credits
PSY 115	Working It Out	2 credits
	Co-op Experience	3-7 credits

### Vocational Core Courses

#### Allied Health

##### Operating Room Assistant

ORA 100	Operating Room Assistant	3 credits
THA 110	Medical Terminology	2 credits

##### Nurse Aid

NUR 100	Nurse's Aide Practice and Concepts	1-9 credits
THA 110	Medical Terminology	2 credits
THA 114	Medical Emergencies	1 credit

#### Business

##### Payroll Clerk

ACC 101	Fundamental of Accounting	3 credits
ACC 115	Computerized Payroll	2 credits
CIS 150	Electronic Spreadsheet, Excel	2 credits



**Receptionist/Office Clerk**

BTE 101	Keyboarding 1	4 credits
BTE 200	Office Procedures	3 credits

**Microsoft Office Pro**

BTE 101	Keyboarding 1	4 credits
CIS 120	Microcomputer Word Processor, Word	3 credits

**Data Entry Clerk**

BTE 101	Keyboarding 1	4 credits
BTE 160	Data Entry	3 credits

**Manufacturing****Lathe Operator**

MTO 130	Introduction to Machine Shop	1 credit
MTO 133	Engine Lathes I	4 credits
MTO 140	Metrology	2 credits

**Mill Operator**

MTO 130	Introduction to Machine Shop	1 credit
MTO 132	Vertical Mills I	4 credits
MTO 140	Metrology	2 credits

**Modular Manufacturing**

MTO 130	Shop Practice and Safety	2 credits
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**Arc Welder**

WEF 180	SMAW Set-Up and Padding	4 credits
WEF 109	SMAW I	4 credits

### **Cabling Specialist**

MTO 140	Introduction to Metrology	2 credits
ELT 108	Introduction to Networking	2 credits

### **Customer Service**

#### **Customer Service Representative**

BTE 101	Keyboarding I	4 credits
BUS 207	Teleservices	3 credits

### **Education**

#### **Early Childhood Education Group Leader**

ECE 101	Introduction to Early Childhood Education	3 credits
ECE 102	ECE Lab Experience	3 credits

#### **Special Education Aid**

HSE 110	Overview of Special Populations	3 credits
HSE 111	Communication Skills/Special Populations	3 credits
HSE 112	First Aid/CPR	1 credit

### **Electives**



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