

By Ilana Lowery, WESTMARC

There are more than 25 post-secondary education institutions in the West Valley that offer programs in the region's targeted industries and these, along with other career pathways for in-demand occupations, are proving to be critical at a time when filling jobs with skilled labor is at an all-time high.

Higher education programs have been extremely successful at developing talent pools in target industries such as advanced business services, construction advanced manufacturing, aerospace, health care, IT, supply chain management and more, said Sintra Hoffman, president and CEO of WESTMARC, a public/private partnership of the 15 communities, the business community and the educational sector in the West Valley.

"The leading factor when companies select a new or expansion location is having a talented workforce in place," Hoffman said. "So, in 2016, we began identifying the West Valley's workforce in key industries to market that talent pool to potential companies to locate here."

WESTMARC and its member communities commissioned a workforce gap analysis in 2018 that focused on the specific future talent needs of the West Valley target industries. Those target industries — and finding skilled workers for jobs in those sectors — have been a focus for WESTMARC ever since.

"Over the next 20 years, nearly 50% of the growth in Maricopa County will occur in the West Valley," Hoffman said. "Building a pipeline of talented workers is critical to the economic success of the West Valley region."

Hoffman said creating partnerships between education and business is key to that mission.

"We've been successful in creating strategic and intentional partnerships through a virtual series "West Valley Industry Spotlight," she said. "Each episode brought together companies in a single industry with education providers to learn their needs so they are better able to create relevant and employable programs."

Paula Livingston, dean of Instruction and Occupational Education at Estrella Mountain Community College, agreed, saying it will be important for industry to explain the needs they have.

"Government, education and industry can work closely to develop pathways to address alternatives ways to a career in very strategic and intentional ways," she said. "Coming together to partner to address the need is a critical first step in developing strong and consistent workforce pipelines."

Livingston went on to say that city government is interested in ensuring their residents have in-demand and high-wage jobs in their community.

"They also want to present to potential industry partners that there is a strong workforce base in the areas as they consider regions for growth and expansion. By working with local educational partners, they can

ensure there are programmatic offerings, in a variety of levels and modalities, to meet these needs. Together they can present the strength of their region.” she said.

“Industry is crucial to the success of any educational pathway,” Livingston added. “Understanding the competencies and skills that students are going to need to be successful employees is essential. When industry is willing to partner with educational providers to develop collaborative educational programs and training opportunities, then we can ensure that we are creating that consistent and strong workforce pipeline. It really takes all three coming to the table to evaluate and assess the anticipated workforce needs, develop strategies to address these needs, and then working collaboratively to develop curriculum and identify resources to deliver on the identified strategies.”

Having a strong pipeline to fill these in-demand jobs means finding or creating opportunities to develop qualified workers. On that front, West Valley leaders are working to re-brand vocational education and Career Technical Education (CTE), integrate more soft-skills learning in K-12 curriculum and build stronger support for STEM education.

According to the analysis commissioned by WESTMARC, there needs to be a shift in the public perception of CTE training, jobs, wages and career advancement opportunities.

“CTE or vocational education is a tough sell to students and parents who have outdated notions of routine or physically demanding jobs that don’t pay well,” the report found. “This mistaken idea is a large contributor to the skills-gap challenge. Yet, nationwide and in the West Valley a significant number of job openings today and in the future will be the middle-skilled ones in career and technical fields that often come with a good salary — such as radiology and other medical technicians, electricians, mechanics, and computer support specialists.”

For example, in the construction industry alone, there are 26 in-demand occupations listed for workers with a high-school diploma or the equivalent, according to the Arizona@Work website. Construction, professional and technical services and information technology are the state’s top three in-demand sectors looking for employees.

West Valley businesses and educational institutions have placed a strong emphasis on meeting employee shortage through resources such as Career Connect, Elevate Arizona, Pathways to Prosperity, Pipeline AZ and Maricopa@Work. All of these organizations have hosted hiring events for employers in the region looking to fill positions immediately.

Programs such as West-MEC’s career and technical education courses, Grand Canyon University’s computer-aided design and cyber security offerings; Maricopa Community Colleges’ myriad IT certificates and other soft skills-oriented programs, some even starting in elementary school, are boosting the employability of West Valley’s talent pool.

Jasmine Chamblin, client relationship coordinator at Pipeline AZ, said it’s never too early to reach out to job seekers.

Many employers agree that “employability skills,” or “soft skills,” often are more important than technical skills and high educational attainment. Soft skills, which can be taught as early as kindergarten, can prepare young people for the constant introduction of new innovations and technology in the workforce, she said.

There also has been a strong push to increase job training across all industries from cybersecurity to construction to trucking, which will support long-term workforce development for the region. Companies like Intel Corp., Discover Financial, Knight-Swift (which offers a logistics lab) and Microsoft, with its Datacenter Academy at EMCC, are providing training programs for workers eager to learn.

One in-demand job area is the IT industry, where there are a variety of educational opportunities and not all jobs require a four-year or advanced degree. Good jobs are available to individuals who obtain industry recognized credentials, associate degrees and higher-level degrees.

EMCC’s Livingston said another field educational institutions are working to address for alternative career pathways is in the semiconductor industry.

“We are working closely with major semiconductor manufacturing partners to develop pathways for students that start with quick-start/boot camp training models that lead to well-paying entry-level jobs,” she said, explaining that participants in the quick-start training program receive college credit for successful completion of the course, and the credit feeds directly into a two-year degree pathway that can advance these employees into the next level position within their organization.

“From an educational standpoint, it’s about offering a broad range of opportunities to address several needs across industries and areas of study and being open to adding programs and courses that address these growing needs,” Livingston said.

Gov. Doug Ducey in January outlined a 2022 policy agenda that included an initiative to significantly expand the state’s workforce. Ducey proposed establishing six advanced manufacturing training centers facilitated by community colleges across Arizona.

In collaboration with industry and academia, the workforce accelerators will form a network of job training centers to prepare workers for next-generation jobs. Arizona’s advanced manufacturers — many of which are located in the West Valley — will partner on the project, streamlining the student-to-skilled-labor pipeline and ensuring skills training aligns with in-demand jobs.

“Let’s invest in the worker, arming them with the skills they need for our growing semiconductor and advanced manufacturing industries,” Ducey said when announcing the initiative. “Whether your top issue is workforce or rural jobs — this is the way to do it: Our budget makes historic investments into community colleges to empower our people with a quality education and the skills of the future.”

The workforce accelerators would be administered by the Arizona Commerce Authority and modeled after Drive48, a state-of-the-art facility that is training workers for jobs in electric vehicle manufacturing.

Drive48 already has impacted the community in its first year of operation – 1,700 Lucid Motors employees have been trained using Drive48’s state-of-the-art tools. Lucid Motors’ Advanced

Manufacturing Facility (AMP-1) in Casa Grande started production of the Lucid Air last year. AMP-1 will create 6,000 jobs by 2029.

The industry-led training centers will feature customized, hands-on curriculum for growing sectors including semiconductor, battery, automotive assembly and more. Like Drive48, the curriculum will be designed in close collaboration with private sector partners to ensure skills training aligns with high-wage employment opportunities.

Programs like this and the Center for the Future of Arizona's Pathways to Prosperity initiative are creating educational, training and credentialing opportunities for students that are aligned with industry needs in high-demand, high-growth industry sectors.

Arizona is part of the national Pathways to Prosperity Network — a collaboration of Jobs for the Future, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and member states and regions — which is working to build systems of college and career pathways.

Informed by industry, and in partnership with educational institutions, the program reimagines how education and workforce systems can meet state and regional talent needs and prepare young people for careers — an important goal with the changing demographics in the West Valley, which now include younger age populations and more families.

Currently, the CFA has advanced implementation with 28 pathway schools through programs of study, career exploration, work-based learning and teacher professional development. Some of the West Valley school systems participating include the Dysart Unified School District, Peoria Unified School District, Empower College Preparatory High School, Western Maricopa Education Center and the Phoenix Union High School District.

Pathways business partners across the state include Raytheon, Abrazo, Banner Health, Dignity Health, Honor Health, Phoenix Children's Hospital, Arizona Public Service, McCarthy Construction, Kitchell Corp., Palo Verde Nuclear Power, Southwest Gas, Sundt, LifeLock and Salt River Project among others.

Expected outcomes from this increased focus on career pathways for in-demand jobs include more workers trained in industry-relevant occupations and a more robust pipeline of skilled workers with expectation that are aligned with West Valley employers; an improved labor participation rate; and better defined pathways for industry-certified, competency-based education.

Additionally, through a stronger emphasis on target-industry training, there also is a goal of fewer West Valley workers commuting east and elsewhere for their careers of choice.