

# Recommendations

**The Lower Hudson Valley stakeholders demonstrate a spirit of cooperation in advancing the economic vitality of the area and the capabilities of the workforce.** Educational institutions and workforce providers strive to keep current with the labor market and have a good understanding of economic trends. Industry groups, economic development organizations, and employers of all types work with the education community to align the skills of the workforce with the needs of the workplace. The recommendations here are intended to further improve the alignment between industry demand and the supply of qualified candidates.

There is work to be done in each targeted occupational area. There are also some common themes and general recommendations. Each of these is covered below.

## Occupation-Specific Recommendations

**Health Information Management** As the health care sector grows, the delivery of health care changes, and electronic health records and other computer systems are increasingly utilized, demand for health information management personnel, which is already strong, is expected to grow.

To help students and jobs seekers qualify for these jobs, stakeholders should:

- **Make sure that programs that prepare people for entry-level administrative jobs in health care cover the basics that employers say they want.** These include computer applications and communication skills but also a comfort level with electronic health records systems and good customer service skills. These entry-level jobs have similar knowledge and skill requirements but can lead in a number of different directions, from medical office management to billing to health information management.
- **Recognize that medical billing and coding are becoming distinct functions and jobs within health care, a point echoed by each interviewed expert.** Medical billers typically work in departments concerned with revenue, while coders can work in the health information management or other departments. Educational institutions should review their course offerings and either specialize in one or the other, or have concentrations in each within a larger degree-bearing program.
- **Keep courses current and updated to include the latest coding systems** (e.g. ICD-10) and commonly used billing software. Versions of these systems are upgraded every few years with profound effects on the management of health information.
- **Wherever possible, offer courses that lead to the certifications and credentials with known value to the industry.** For example, in medical coding and health information management, the only credentials mentioned by industry experts or listed in online job ads were those associated with AHIMA and AAPC.<sup>1</sup> An industry-preferred credential is essential to landing entry-level work as a coder and it helps workers compete for higher-level jobs in health information management.
- **Consider offering an associate degree program accredited by CAHIIM<sup>2</sup> and leading to AHIMA's Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT) credential.** Apart from an online program offered by a private university, there are no programs in the Lower Hudson Valley that offer this. The RHIT is an increasingly in-demand credential.
- **Help students get hands-on experience.** Practical experience is highly marketable, but difficult to achieve in the classroom. This lack of experience helps explain why some positions are so hard to fill. One industry expert suggested a “boot camp” for coding, where students can practice with de-identified medical records. Another option is AHIMA's VLab (Virtual Lab), an Internet-based simulated work environment that colleges can subscribe to.

<sup>1</sup> AHIMA is the American Health Information Management Association. AAPC is American Academy of Professional Coders.

<sup>2</sup> CAHIIM is the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education

## Tech Support

Tech support is a large and growing field within IT. The New York State Department of Labor predicts a growth rate of 12 percent for these jobs in the Hudson Valley. Over the last year, there were more than 700 Lower Hudson Valley tech support positions advertised online. Even though there are a number of credit and non-credit programs, including online programs, that prepare people for work in this field, employers still report difficulty finding people with the combination of technical and customer service skills that they seek.

To help students and jobs seekers qualify for these jobs, stakeholders should:

- **Offer programs that lead to an industry-recognized certification, such as the vendor-neutral CompTIA A+ or Network + certification, both of which give candidates an advantage in securing employment.** Several of the programs currently being offered in the region did not lead to any certifications or credentials.
- **Include hands-on experience.** All employers were looking for people who had hands-on experience. This could be a particular issue for online programs and it is not clear whether they include sufficient, if any, lab time. If they do not, there is great need to offer students this essential experience.
- **Find a way to teach customer service as well as technical skills, and give students practice working with users to resolve their computer issues.** Getting a job, keeping it, and advancing into a career often hinge on good communication and interpersonal skills. Uniformly, employers said that they are looking for people who already have these customer service skills. In this field, sensitivity to diversity among computer users is also necessary.
- **Encourage people in entry-level tech support jobs to continue their education for an associate, and then a bachelor's degree, both of which will enhance their career prospects.** While people with a high school diploma and some technical training can secure entry-level jobs in tech support, they will need more education to advance within tech support and move into other

related areas, such as those that combine tech support with business skills (e.g. business analyst).

- **Consider offering the fundamental principles of computing in entry-level courses to help prepare students for career advancement beyond tech support.**

## Hospitality Management

Leisure and hospitality is a growing part of the Lower Hudson Valley economy. The largest area by far within leisure and hospitality is the restaurant and food service business, followed by hotels. Both industries have grown and changed over the last ten years and offer many good middle-skill jobs for people who enjoy this type of work. There is a consensus among the employers interviewed that an associate degree is needed in order to advance into management positions within hospitality. For higher level positions, a bachelor's degree is preferred.

To help students and job seekers qualify for these jobs, stakeholders should:

- **Consider broadening their programs to cover the larger hospitality field, which would position students for management work in all types of hospitality businesses, such as restaurants, full and limited service hotels, country clubs, casinos, fitness centers, and amusement areas.** There are a number of associate degree programs in Culinary Arts right now, and some include Management or Food Service Administration, but none with the scope and structure these results suggest are needed.
- **Focus on developing customer service and teamwork skills as well as the more technical business skills, such as accounting, business planning, or sales.** Any hospitality program should also include an internship or experiential learning component.
- **Seek opportunities with employers or industry associations to upgrade their current workforces.** Industry experts pointed out that hospitality employers are selective in choosing employees at all levels, and they want to promote from within, but some employees need to develop additional skills or education, whether these are English language skills, other types of communication skills, or more technical skills.

## General Recommendations

In addition to the occupation-specific recommendations, there were several themes that were common to more than one field. These implicitly recognize the diversity of the population of the Lower Hudson Valley, the importance of interpersonal skills in the workplace, and the greater opportunities available to people with higher education. It is also important to continue the type of research and collaborative stakeholder effort undertaken in this **New Skills at Work** project.

Stakeholders should:

- **Keep abreast of industry trends and practices in all of the occupations and industries for which students and job seekers are being prepared.** There are tremendous benefits to keeping current with emerging business trends and employer practices. Not only did the data reviewed for this project show patterns of growth and contraction, but every single interview with an industry expert revealed new practices and business trends that are harbingers of the future. For example, as employer sourcing practices evolve, those responsible for helping students and job seekers secure employment must understand and adapt.
- **Continually update the labor market information summarized in this report.** This information should be used to keep course and program offerings aligned with employer demand and industry needs and standards.
- **Create or take advantage of industry-education partnerships, especially in health care, IT, and hospitality.** The community colleges and training providers should work together to develop and expand relationships with industry, with a focus on identifying opportunities for work-based learning, internships, and other types of support from the business community.
- **Coordinate educational offerings regionally to avoid overcapacity in some areas and under-capacity in others, and improve the articulation from one level of training and education to the next.**
- **Prepare bilingual staff for service industries.** In industries such as health care and hospitality, there is a growing need for bilingual personnel. Health care generally serves the surrounding community, and a number of Hispanic and Asian residents speak only a language other than English. In hospitality, the customer base is increasingly diverse. As the Lower Hudson Valley resident population continues to diversify, the workforce must be able to understand and meet patient and customer needs.

- **Infuse interpersonal skills and practical experience into offerings across disciplines.** Across all industries, employers reiterated the value of good interpersonal skills, including cultural sensitivity, for almost every job. They also mentioned the importance of hands-on experience. As the community colleges and training providers revisit their curricula and course offerings to align further with industry needs, they should find a way to incorporate interpersonal skills and practical experience into their offerings. Teaching these skills could take the form of contextualized learning, simulated work environments, practice in real work situations, or other approaches.

- **Be creative in engaging students to continue their education, even after they start working.** The Lower Hudson Valley has a diverse population with tremendous capacity and potential. Although the area has a highly educated population on average, this high level of education is not uniform across all racial and ethnic groups. All providers of education and training should engage in thoughtful strategies for outreach, especially to those that may be underrepresented in higher education. Some educational institutions in the Lower Hudson Valley are already quite adept at outreach, but this needs to be done well across the board. More can be done to leverage the talents of all segments of the population to make the economy function even better.

The findings in this report underscore the fact that more education yields better employment and career prospects. Increasingly, a bachelor's degree is becoming the standard for advancement across the labor market. Educators and workforce practitioners should make it convenient for working adults to continue their education, and they should use instructional techniques and practices that engage students.

- **Most importantly, maintain the stakeholder group convened for this initiative.**

## Conclusion

**New Skills at Work** in the Lower Hudson Valley not only provides a blueprint for strengthening middle-skill opportunities in select occupations, but it also offers a platform for continued collaboration among education, business, and government representatives who have shared interests in strengthening local talent pipelines. The high level of cooperation and involvement on display among the stakeholders suggests a collective will to pursue these and other recommendations well after the Initiative comes to a formal close.