

Education 2 Career

College of Marin (COM) joined hands three years ago with Canal Alliance, a San Rafael nonprofit that provides local immigrants with resources and support. The goal was to brainstorm ways to create a meaningful college-to-work program that would support the Canal community by providing training for sustainable careers.

“To start, we asked, where are the jobs that pay a livable wage in Marin and how do we get students into these jobs?” explains Katheryn Horton, COM’s director of workforce programs. Once the decision was made to focus on construction, which typically offers jobs starting over \$25 an hour, the team recruited the Marin Builders Association to join the partnership. Their role is to match e2c students with construction jobs.

This partnership, which is primed to be replicated for other trainings, relies on three crucial elements: a community-based organization that recruits students and offers support services before, during, and after the training; a training provider that is willing to customize trainings to best accommodate students; and, an employer or group of employers who are ready to hire after the training and pay a living wage.

Canal Alliance staff frequently work with each student to ensure they have what they need to successfully complete the course, providing wrap-around services, such as housing, food, financial assistance, transportation; whatever is needed for the student to succeed.

“We remove the barriers so they can attend,” says Air Gallegos, director of education and career at Canal Alliance. “Most clients have already gone through the Immigration Legal Services (ILS) Department to legally work here. But if they haven’t, we work with ILS Department to help them get this status.”

“One of the wonderful things about our partnership with COM is how they work with our clients,” remarks Gallegos. “A lot of our clients don’t have a high school diploma. COM shifted their program to allow for our students to go into the program and get a certificate they can take with them to get a job with a living wage.”

COM instructor Dennis Hansen has been teaching short-term construction courses since the start of e2c. The course includes training in OSHA laws and employee rights, and extensive training in tool safety. Each class puts their training into practice by completing a portion of a 60 square-foot storage shed where the next class continues where the last left off.

“My students break into two groups – those with no previous experience to those with between six to seven years’ experience,” Hansen reveals. “They both benefit equally. The ones who have never been exposed are now viable hires to contractors, and those with more experience have now been certified and can get raises. Almost everyone with a certificate either shows it to their boss for a raise or transfers to another job and gets more money.”

Students also receive classes through Canal Alliance to build their soft skills on writing resumes and giving interviews. Afterwards, Marin Builders staff meet with the students and collect their resumes to send to contractors needing employees.

“That’s what has been great working with Marin Builders and the employers they work with,” Gallegos mentions. “They know our clients are strong hires with more construction skills than most entering the job. It’s been a great partnership.”

While the program consists of mostly men, there have been four women who have taken the course, and Canal Alliance is continually looking for more women who are interested in construction as a career.

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To start this summer's class, students, instructors, and staff followed the state COVID-19 protocols for construction and COM's protocol for hosting students and faculty on campus. Of the eighteen students who started the program in the spring, eight graduated on August 19 during a heart-felt online graduation ceremony.

After graduation, all the students were ready for interviews and half already had jobs.

"Our e2c construction graduates are the real stars here," states Alina Varona, dean of workforce development and career education at COM. "They would not be deterred from successfully finishing their program. Socially distanced, masked, and all day on Saturdays, they are the definition of persistence."

Gallegos adds, "COM has been great at realizing where our clients are coming from; that they aren't able to do a year-long program and hold three jobs at the same time. COM helped to truncate the training to help get our clients into living wage, sustainable careers."

COM is looking to other workforce programs to find areas where the College may be able to expand. "There is a huge need in healthcare because of the pandemic," states Horton. "So, we are working with faculty and community members to come up with training cohorts for specific fields."

Hansen is actively looking for members to be on COM's Construction Advisory Committee, as it is a direct link with the community to asks those in the industry what they want and need. Additionally, they are looking into a two-year transfer program in construction management, and a two-year building management degree to learn how to maintain smart buildings.

Gallegos and her coworkers at Canal Alliance are continually seeking partners who want to expand their programming while building equity by giving people a living wage in Marin County. They have already started a small business pathway to help business owners, and they just finished their first pathway for contact tracers / investigators.

"It's been found that it is more successful when contact tracers are from within the community they are serving to offer better support," asserts Gallegos. "They will also be more effective because of having bicultural and biliteracy skills."

Varona sees the e2c program as "emblematic of COM's commitment to serving the needs of our community even in the face of challenges. e2c serves as a testament to the power of partnership between industry, community-based organizations, and institutions of higher learning. It really demonstrates what we can accomplish when we leverage each organization's strengths effectively on behalf of our students."

Learn more about College of Marin at marin.edu; Canal Alliance at canalalliance.org; and Marin Builders Association at marinbuilders.com.