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FutureReady States Profile: Mississippi





Intro

This year, when officials at Hinds Community College reviewed the college's workforce training programs, they were hyper focused on a new metric for success: an index that gauges the labor market value of the credentials students earn. While the college has been helping residents in and around Jackson, Mississippi, pursue their "purpose, passion, and profession" for 100 years, it is now giving more weight to hard data to better guide students. It's a conscious, data-driven effort to highlight the options that lead to the high-wage, high-demand jobs that are driving the state's economic expansion—and there's little room for sentimentality in decisions about which programs to add, expand, streamline, or close.

In fact, some of the college's more popular short-term credential programs have not done well on the data test. Though some of these programs have long sustained enrollment at Hinds' six campuses, they've been curtailed because they've not consistently led to meaningful job prospects and produced wages of at least \$20 an hour.

The college's "program health index" includes traditional metrics such as enrollments, completion rates, and costs to

run a program. But the index puts the most emphasis on each credential's job market demand and likely earnings. That's why some programs traditionally offered at four campuses may only be available in one location. Others that have consistently been popular may close – that, or students who enroll in them will be given clear, unbiased information about the labor market outcomes they should expect.

Hinds is among the community colleges and workforce training centers that are fully embracing Mississippi's new workforce strategy, which includes hefty investments in short-term education and training programs for jobs in the fastest-growing and most stable industries.

Traditional four-year college pathways are still a priority in Mississippi. But the state is expanding and aligning career and technical education systems to help more students earn "credentials of value" that lead to good jobs and put individuals on a path to economic mobility. While the state has a standard definition of "credentials of value" for its K-12 career and technical education programs, it is still working on one specific to higher education. Institutions such as Hinds have set their own metrics for a programs' value in the labor market.

Mississippi's Challenge

As in most states, the short-term credential landscape in Mississippi can be difficult to navigate. Hundreds of programs and pathways are available, and far too many fail to deliver the skills and certifications that employers value.

The workforce strategy launched five years ago under Gov. Tate Reeves was designed to fuel the state's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. That effort helped rebuild the state's workforce capacity just as an influx of new industries and skilled jobs sparked some welcome economic optimism. Data centers, manufacturing plants, and high-tech agricultural businesses are being built or expanding, fueling a construction boom and a proliferation of new technologies in fields traditionally seen as blue-collar. That progress has created thousands of jobs for those with the requisite certifications and credentials. In construction alone, the state estimates it needs 100,000 skilled workers this year.

Short-term credentials are a key part of the state strategy for meeting the needs of the changing economy – for employers and workers alike. The effort to transform the short-term credential landscape is now centralized under a state entity called AccelerateMS. Its mission is to connect education and training institutions with industry partners to align credentials with existing, high-wage jobs. It must also assess short-term programs' job market success – their return on students' investment.

A newly created Postsecondary Attainment Council officially launched in July 2026 to push institutions to improve students' access to and success in post-high school programs. The effort

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is aimed at ensuring the state meets its goal that at least 55 percent of working-age Mississippians earn a “credential of value” by 2030, and 60 percent by 2035. The state is currently at 49 percent, well below the national average of 55 percent.

“There’s a lot of opportunity in the state right now and a greater expectation that these short-term credential programs can give people a real leg up for a good job,” said AccelerateMS Executive Director Courtney Taylor. “It’s time we focus our resources on the programs that are proving their value and hold our institutions accountable to the ideal that we can and must train people out of the recurring cycle of poverty.”



Mississippi's Approach:

To realize that vision, it is essential that educators and state officials 1) make students aware of the job prospects open to those with the requisite education and technical training, and 2) clear barriers to high-quality credential programs.

Early on in its workforce development efforts, the state expanded access to career and technical education (CTE) in middle and high schools and added incentives for K-12 systems to help students earn industry-recognized credentials while in high school. This approach increased participation but also highlighted the need to better align credential pathways, students' postsecondary aspirations, and regional economic demand. To do that, the state has invested in more robust data systems and compiled a validated list of 24 promising credential pathways – those that map to jobs that meet the living wage standard and lead to further advancement in a trade or technical field. For example, the list includes a path for earning core requirements that apply toward national certification in numerous trade occupations, as well as paths to careers in fields such as logistics, maritime trades, and advanced manufacturing. The list, sanctioned by the State Workforce Investment Board is also designed to determine eligibility for industry grants as well as meet federal Perkins V reporting requirements.

The lessons learned in the K-12 CTE system are being more widely applied in post-high school settings as AccelerateMS leverages data, funding, and other incentives to move providers

toward programs that meet the desired outcomes. With support from Lumina Foundation's FutureReady States initiative, AccelerateMS is leading Mississippi's effort to define "credential of value" metrics, improve credential pathways that have stackable and portable credentials, and better align programs with the needs of employers – especially those in high-demand sectors.

The targeted approach provides a clearer map for students who may inadvertently face dead ends or logistical detours in traditional career pathways. For example, there is no clear continuity from a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) credential to a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) to a Registered Nurse (RN), or from a dental assistant credential to a dental hygienist license.

More attention also is being paid to the supports and services that make it feasible for adult learners to attend and complete programs – from transportation and childcare to financial aid to access to campus food pantries. Some colleges, such as Pearl River Community College, also focus on campus culture to make sure adult learners feel welcome and supported. Short-term programs have been moved from mobile homes and prefab units into the main buildings. Students are encouraged to take an orientation course to familiarize themselves with the college's processes and to learn how to navigate the college's supports and services.



Signs of Progress

Over the past several years, the reputation of non-credit programs in Mississippi has shifted, and programs have moved from the hidden corners of campus to showcase facilities with high-tech equipment. Credentials are seen as central to community college programming, both to serve industry workforce needs and as an important pathway for students.

AccelerateMS has done a great deal to highlight the importance of short-term credentials in meeting the state's workforce needs. Community colleges and other training providers say AccelerateMS has pushed them to make program decisions more thoughtfully, supported by more data, to guide students into sustainable career paths. As a central hub for the state's workforce investments, AccelerateMS has:

- Aligned some \$125 million in workforce development investments with job and wage outcomes over the past three years, including \$70 million in federal funds from the post-COVID American Rescue Plan Act.
- Rewarded community colleges that are aligned with the state workforce strategy with an additional \$36 million to create and expand workforce training programs that lead to a credential of value.
- Managed a \$3 million Mississippi Artificial Intelligence Network initiative reflecting the state's initial effort to train workers for the AI age. The forward-thinking approach supports the rapidly changing labor market and investments from NVIDIA, Amazon Web Services, and other data centers, bringing in more than \$20 billion in new investment and hundreds of new jobs.

Enrollments are growing in many short-term credential programs that are aligned with industry jobs, and the state is working to create reporting dashboards that more accurately track credential completions, where candidates land employment, and whether they meet expected wage thresholds.

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Looking Ahead

Mississippi has gained some national recognition for its public-private workforce strategy. It also has drawn several large anchor employers to areas that have long been considered opportunity deserts. The state now ranks high on several job growth indicators and continues to lure new industry investments.

Now the state is working to persuade more of the state's 15 community colleges to focus on credentials of value in their program decisions. They must also find ways to connect short-term credentials with students' prior learning and thus ease their path into further education, including degree programs. On many campuses, the for-credit and non-credit programs are totally separate. AccelerateMS is also looking for ways to help community colleges expand career coaching and other student services.

The idea of requiring better alignment between programs and job and wage outcomes is gaining traction with educators and key state lawmakers. Expanding the effort, however, will require a bigger coalition and greater coordination with employers large and small. It will also require more hard decisions about

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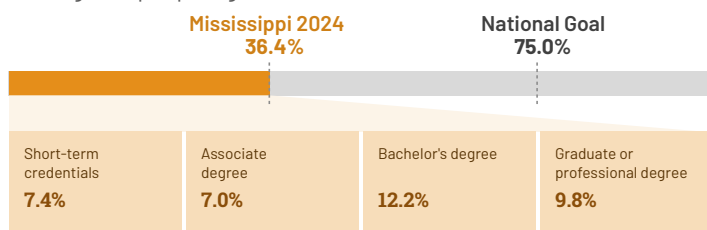
which programs truly meet the needs of the labor market and best prepare students for long-term success.

“Mississippi must prioritize the return on investment for these programs over tradition or convenience,” Taylor said. “We have some momentum, but we need to understand the urgency for aligning programs to high-demand, high-wage jobs and be willing to break from the past.”

Mississippi Snapshot

Credentials of Value Share in Mississippi

Among 1.1m people ages 25-64 in the labor force



Measured as the share of the labor force with a post-high school degree, certification, or certificate and are making at least 15% more than the national median annual salary of a high school graduate. Source: Lumina Foundation's A Stronger Nation, 2025

Definition of Credentials of Value:

The state has not adopted an official definition of a “credential of value” but AccelerateMS, the state’s leading workforce entity, has prioritized funding for programs that lead to postsecondary

workforce certifications, industry credentials, or academic degrees linked to high-growth, high-wage occupations.

Partners/Collaborators in State Short-Term Credential Efforts

- AccelerateMS
- Mississippi Community College Board
- Build Mississippi
- Mississippi Department of Education
- Hinds Community College
- Pearl River Community College
- State Workforce Investment Board

Priority or Emerging Industry Sectors

Agriculture technology, advanced manufacturing, construction, IT/artificial intelligence infrastructure, maritime trades.

From Training to Employment

The glass-enclosed classrooms of Hinds Community College’s Rankin Campus buzz with the sights and sounds typically found on a busy construction site. Sparks fly in a welding booth where an instructor watches a student cut and join metal pieces. Workers on stepladders guide electrical wires through the studs of a framed room. A team of plumbers surveys a wall of PVC joints as they work on a bathroom project.

Hinds and more than a dozen Mississippi community colleges and technical training centers are working overtime to help tens of thousands of adults get the credentials they need to fill some 100,000 construction jobs across the state. With help from Build Mississippi, an industry-sponsored nonprofit, state institutions are ramping up programs to recruit, train, and place workers in an array of fields such as carpentry, HVAC, electrical, and heavy equipment operation.

With programs designed by and for employers in the state’s growing construction industry, Build Mississippi helps craft training and credentialing in almost 200 career and technical programs that follow National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) requirements. The programs train most electricians in the state, along with large numbers of plumbers, HVAC technicians, sheet metal workers, truck drivers, and other essential construction workers. The programs are designed by industry through the Mississippi Construction Education Foundation and paid for through a tax on the Mississippi businesses that benefit.

The programs have been a welcome opportunity for recent high school graduates and adults in the Mississippi Reconnect program, which helps pay tuition and other costs for unemployed and underemployed workers to get training and credentials tied to current job opportunities. Through a partnership with the state corrections agency, more than 1,700 inmates have participated in construction-related certification programs as well.

With nearly \$8 billion in construction projects – including two data centers, a power station, infrastructure investments, and a paper packaging plant – the state is prioritizing short-term credential programs across the construction trades that give students in-demand skills. For many of those pursuing training, costs are covered by an industry tax combined with other federal and state workforce funding. Most students who complete credential programs leave debt free and with a job offer.

“There are so many options and paths for students to get training that moves them into jobs that pay well and have a future,” said Ginger Robbins, who oversees workforce development programming at Hinds. “They can build a good life right here in Mississippi. We can help students not just get the training they need for a good job and a good wage right now, but there are long-lasting and rewarding careers that return a lot of value for those who pursue ongoing training and certifications.”

FutureReady States – Priorities

The FutureReady States initiative is a key element of Lumina Foundation's bold new goal: by 2040, 75 percent of U.S. adults in the labor market will have a degree or other credential of value leading to economic prosperity. The FutureReady States – Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia – are receiving technical support to develop shared strategies and measurable goals to ensure that short-term credential programs deliver positive outcomes for learners and employers. The FutureReady States are taking a customized approach focused on three general priorities:

- Conducting a landscape analysis of short-term education and training opportunities and the various funding sources for institutions and learners.
- Identifying opportunities for strengthening pathways, such as defining “stackability” and creating more seamless alignment between degree and non-degree programs.
- Developing strategies to improve the return on investment for short-term credential programs, such as defining standards for credentials of value, building out data systems, and tracking job and wage earnings for specific credentials.

Lumina Foundation 2040 Goal – A Stronger Nation

In a changing world, education is more important than ever. Lumina Foundation believes that higher education should be a tool for opportunity, helping people create a better, more prosperous future for themselves and their families. That's why Lumina has set a bold new goal: By 2040, 75 percent of adults in the U.S. labor force will have college degrees or other credentials of value leading to economic prosperity.

To do so will require helping a greater proportion of the adult population to tap into the many education and training

options available beyond high school. Short-term credentials are an essential part of that equation, but they must reflect high-quality preparation and demonstrate a direct link to good jobs and better wages.

Nearly three dozen states are funding 111 active initiatives for improving the short-term credential ecosystem, at a total of \$8.1 billion, according to the latest data compiled by HCM Strategists with funding from Lumina. That's up from last year's total of 70 initiatives in 32 states totaling \$5.6 billion.



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