

CASE STUDY

Waubonsee Community College

Uses Labor Market Data to Anticipate Needs, Develop High-Impact Programs

Despite a challenging enrollment environment for many colleges, Waubonsee Community College (WCC) is thriving by prioritizing data-driven program development. In 2018, WCC made Toni Ford the college's first full time Program Development Coordinator. Using labor market data from Lightcast, Ford's team evaluates program opportunities by three key criteria, asking if those programs will lead to jobs that are: **high demand, high growth, and high wage**. As a result, Waubonsee is able to anticipate student needs and create programs that deliver compelling value to students.

Proactive program planning

In recent years, shifting demographics and a relatively tight labor market have presented a challenging enrollment environment for many colleges. But these challenges also present an opportunity for institutions to adapt to meet the evolving needs of their communities. That's been the proactive approach taken by Waubonsee Community College to fulfill their mission of providing quality, accessible education to over 14,000 students in northeast Illinois.

In 2018, amid a renewed focus on offering high-value programs strongly aligned with needs in the regional labor market, Waubonsee leadership created a new role dedicated to program development. To fill the new role, they tapped Toni Ford, an experienced educator who had been serving as the college's career and technical education (CTE) program coordinator since 2017.

In her new role, Ford has worked with the program development team to fine-tune an objective, data-driven process for evaluating potential new programs. The rigorous system ensures that Waubonsee invests strategically in programs that deliver the most value for students. Best of all, it provides a common basis for program decisions. Faculty and administration work together, check intuitions against data, and ask why the numbers look the way they do in order to build relevant programs that deliver student success.



THE CHALLENGE

Shifting demographics and a tight labor market have created a challenging enrollment environment for community colleges



THE SOLUTION

Combining Lightcast data with qualitative research to craft in-demand programs that offer compelling value to students



THE RESULTS

WCC leadership has a data-driven framework for planning and evaluation that ensures programs prepare students for good jobs

Gap analysis provides a compass for growth

Equipped with a shared vision for program planning, Waubonsee needed the tools to carry it out. They commissioned a community needs survey to obtain critical qualitative feedback on peoples' perception of the college, including the kinds of programs they'd like to see. To complement this data, Waubonsee also wanted a comprehensive, objective overview of how their programs aligned with local labor market conditions. For this insight, they partnered with Lightcast to complete a [Program Demand Gap Analysis \(PDGA\)](#).

Ford's team was then able to "crosswalk" between the community survey and the PDGA to see where community interests intersect labor market demand. For example, technology programs were a common theme in survey responses. The PDGA projected growth in the tech industry over the next 10 years, and also showed a gap between the average annual job openings and the average annual regional completers for some technology-related programs. This triangulation has enabled Waubonsee to plan programs with confidence.

"We're now able to give students better options," said Ford. "We are making sure they have solid programs that lead to well paying, high demand jobs."

The recipe for relevant programs: high demand, fast growth, good wages

While the community survey and PDGA provided a helpful foundation, Waubonsee also strives to make up-to-date labor market data an integral part of ongoing curriculum and program decisions. For this, they rely on [Analyst](#), Lightcast's comprehensive labor market analytics tool, that combines traditional government data sources, including IPEDS and BLS, with real-time data sources like job postings and professional profiles, in one user-friendly interface.

As the point person for new program development, Ford is often the one pulling up Analyst to quickly generate the reports her team needs for informed decision-making. For her initial review, she uses Analyst to assess new program ideas through the lens of three key criteria:

- **High demand** – are there job openings and job postings for related occupations in their service region?
- **High growth** – Are the number of occupations increasing year over year? Is the industry growing?
- **High wage** – How do the wages match up against the cost of living in Illinois? Do the target occupations pay a decent wage? Specifically, will grads working in those jobs be paid above the poverty line and above the standard cost of living in the state?

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Toni Ford
Program Development Coordinator
WAUBONSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE





These three indicators help forecast the long-term viability of a program. They also measure whether the available jobs will provide a solid financial foundation for a successful post-graduate life. Programs chosen according to these metrics have proven to be popular.

"I think now, as we're rolling out our new programs, we're successful because we've identified real needs," said Ford.

This framework brings clarity to hard choices. For example, when the college investigated the possibility of training home health care aides, the demand numbers were "off the charts," as Ford put it. The pay however, was not. So the program didn't make the cut. "We decided not to pursue the program—because we wanted to develop programs that not only are in demand, but also pay our students a good wage," Ford said.

Paralegal training, on the other hand, checked all the boxes, and the newly developed curriculum is currently on its way to the state for approval. That's the power of having clear, data-driven criteria for program development.

From good data to good decisions (the importance of asking "why?")

In some cases, deciding whether a program is a good fit means digging deeper to find out why the numbers look the way they do.

For instance, at first glance, the data within the PDGA seemed to indicate that occupational therapy was a strong contender. The pay was great, the number of available jobs was growing, and very few other schools in Illinois offered programs. Then Ford asked the magic question: "But why?" If occupational therapy would make such a winning program, why wasn't it offered at more schools?

It soon became clear why there was so little competition from other colleges. Occupational therapy programs face unusually high barriers to accreditation—barriers that made it an unrealistic choice for Waubonsee. The American Occupational Therapy Association requires colleges to have full time faculty on staff before the organization will evaluate them, and the next available evaluation slot isn't till 2022. Essentially, Waubonsee would have to pay a full-time faculty member for several years before it could actually offer courses. Ford decided not to pursue the program.



On the other hand, Waubonsee has pursued programs with significant barriers to entry in cases where the numbers and the opportunity make sense. The college is building a new career and technical education building that will house a diesel technician program. Despite the effort and expense involved in finding space, Ford said pursuing the diesel program is worth it because the gap between employer demand and regional completions is so large. The PDGA projected 320 annual openings over the next decade for bus and truck mechanic/diesel engine specialist jobs requiring an associate's degree, but only 41 completions per year (on average) in Waubonsee's service region. In this case, the data helped confirm that additional CTE infrastructure would be a worthwhile investment.

Facing the future with confidence

Data provides information necessary to make informed decisions, but it won't make decisions for you. Ford's team does the research and critical thinking to help Waubonsee make the best decisions possible when faced with tough choices—whether it's saying no to drone certification, or yes to cyber security.

"We're trying to figure out what the students need before they know they need it," says Ford. "Ultimately, it's about making a difference in students' lives. Giving them more options and making sure they have solid programs that lead to well-paying, high demand jobs."

Toni Ford presented on this case at [Emsi2019](#), our ninth annual users' conferences in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho. Contact us if you'd like to learn more about Lightcast data at your institution.



Waubonsee Community College, located in northeast Illinois, serves 14,000+ students with over 850 for-credit, personal enrichment, and professional development courses.



Toni Ford, Program Development Coordinator at Waubonsee, has helped advance the college's data-driven process for evaluating potential programs.



The program development process combines hard data on employer demand, occupation growth, and wages with qualitative information to help tease out what the numbers mean.



Waubonsee leadership's commitment to data-driven decision making provides a common foundation for evaluating programs and making tough decisions.

About

Lightcast, formerly Emsi Burning Glass, delivers job market analytics that empower employers, workers, and educators to make data-driven decisions. The company's artificial intelligence technology analyzes hundreds of millions of job postings and real-life career transitions to provide insight into labor market patterns. This real-time strategic intelligence offers crucial insights, such as what jobs are most in demand, the specific skills employers need, and the career directions that offer the highest potential for workers. Visit lightcast.io for more information.

