



For Immediate Release

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Community Colleges provide engagement, the key to longevity for senior citizens

Staying physically active is a key component of overall wellness for older Americans, but staying socially active and financially healthy is essential, too. Area community colleges might hold the keys to a brighter future for West Virginia seniors.

Many studies, including one published in “The Gerontologist”, a peer-reviewed journal, have found that [productive engagement of senior citizens is directly correlated to greater life satisfaction](#), better health and economic stability. Fostering social connections outside of the family unit generally [keeps seniors healthier and happier](#).

BridgeValley Community and Technical College (BVCTC), which has locations in Montgomery and South Charleston, has recently recommitted itself to help meet the needs of its senior citizen community by actively trying to provide more opportunities for them to get involved. While most might think of community colleges as the place for 20-something students on their way to four-year universities, many senior citizens are finding their way back into social circles and the workforce via the two-year institution.

“We’ve seen many seniors become interested in recent years, and we have found that there is a need to help them become re-engaged in their communities,” said Laura McCullough, BridgeValley’s vice president of Community and Corporate Education. “At BridgeValley, we have a whole host of resources to make it easier for 55 plus adults to come back to college and get what they’re looking for by going back to school.”

BVCTC has dozens of community education classes for professional development, but McCullough said the college has Personal and Family Enrichment courses curated for area seniors. The college currently offers courses in wine tasting, pottery, painting, quilting and other arts and crafts; “Smartphones for Seniors” and

other basic technology literacy classes; and more.

“When seniors take these courses, not only do they get the benefits of getting out of the house and socializing, but they also get the benefit of learning a new skill,” McCullough said. “And what we have seen is that when a senior citizen gets one of these new tools, they are more hopeful, happy and curious. BridgeValley can offer them that.”

BVCTC is finding older Americans coming to campus for more than just personal enrichment, too. Nearly 20 percent of its students are over 35 and, in recent semesters, has seen between 20-40 seniors enrolled at the college. Many of these seniors are coming back not just for fun but finding ways to “upskill” or take professional development courses to stay current with the demand of today’s job sector.

Myisha Robinson, the Title V Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) director at the West Virginia Bureau of Senior Services, wants to help seniors get those additional skills they might need to get back to work in a changing economy. SCSEP is a community service and work-based job training program that provides training for low-income, unemployed seniors.

“As with any person, there are certain skills that one needs to be employable. With the SCSEP program, some of the participants have never been employed, been without work due to health, or are retired or whatever the case may be,” Robinson said. “Our program allows them to become reacclimated into the workforce by providing them with hands-on training. They also learn other necessary workplace competencies like soft skills, dressing for success and building resumes. These trainings help provide a refresher, as well as building confidence amongst seniors looking to reenter the workforce.”

SCSEP participants gain work experience in various community service activities at nonprofit and public facilities, including schools, hospitals, day-care centers and senior centers. The program provides more than 40 million community service hours to public and nonprofit agencies, allowing them to enhance and provide needed services.

Participants are paid the highest federal, state or local minimum wage and work an average of 20 hours a week. This training serves as a bridge to unsubsidized employment opportunities for participants. To be eligible, participants must be at least 55, unemployed and have a family income of no more than 125 percent of the federal poverty level. Veterans and qualified spouses have priority enrollment, followed by those over 65, have a disability, reside in a rural area, or have other risk factors.

Some of the most common skills needed for West Virginia seniors wanting to reenter the workforce, according to Robinson, are those that help them cross the so-called “digital divide.” SCSEP recipients at BVCTC can work on bridging that gap

with the college's Computer Basics class, which focuses specifically on helping students increase their employability by training them to use computers and basic software programs.

Soon, Robinson said, SCSEP's partnership will also include BVCTC's "Smart Phones for Seniors" course. The hope is to make seniors in the program more marketable to employers and increase their comfort level with technology.

"The goal of the SCSEP program is to diminish barriers that seniors face by providing them with needed supportive services and to increase their self-sufficiency and marketability to potential employers," Robinson said. "Our partnership with BVCTC is vital because it provides us the chance to offer so many growth opportunities to our SCSEP enrollees at no cost to the enrollee."

SCSEP is in the process of obtaining additional funding to purchase tablets for seniors to use while they are in the program, Robinson said, giving them the freedom to explore the technology in the comfort of their homes. Many seniors do not own personal devices, electronics or smartphones, so providing these to seniors in the program would give them time to get familiar with the technology.

The partnership between SCSEP and BVCTC will also broaden the opportunities for a senior to participate in associate or certificate degrees that the college offers.

"BridgeValley knows there's a need in our senior communities, and we want to be a part of the solution," McCullough said. "We know our courses will help enrich their lives and help them get new skills that can make it easier to transition back into the workforce if that's what they're looking for."

About BridgeValley Community and Technical College

BridgeValley Community and Technical College promotes student success, prepares a skilled workforce, and builds tomorrow's leaders by providing access to quality higher education. BridgeValley Community and Technical College will be the college of opportunity for a diverse learner population, offering leading-edge technology, innovative ideas, and dynamic service to our students and our communities. BridgeValley Community and Technical College serves a six-county region including Fayette, Raleigh, Nicholas, Clay, Putnam and Kanawha counties. The college operates two campuses in Montgomery and South Charleston, along with the addition of the new Advanced Technology Center. BridgeValley Community and Technical College is a public institution of higher education independently accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges and a member of the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia.