

Farm Field to Truck Cab

Big Bend Community College Upskills Rural Workers

PARTNERS:

- Big Bend Community College
- State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
- North Central Washington Workforce Development Council
- The Opportunity Industrialization Center of Washington

Big Bend Community College in Moses Lake is strengthening the region's rural economy by helping farm workers move from the field to behind the wheel of a commercial truck. This vocational program for adults who may lack basic reading, writing or language skills has prepared over 150 low-wage workers for high-wage, in-demand transportation jobs needed by the region's agribusinesses.

The college's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) for Commercial Driver's License (CDL) Program uses the highly effective and nationally recognized I-BEST model of two instructors in the classroom—one teaching the professional-technical content while the other supports the development of basic skills in reading, math or language skills. Many of the participants are low-skilled, Spanish-speaking agricultural workers.

What sets Big Bend Community College's program apart is how well it targets adult workers. The course is not scheduled on traditional college quarters but instead meets three evenings each week and all day Saturday and Sunday for a 10-week period. This allows students to continue working as they prepare for new careers. Students completing the program have a 98 percent pass rate on the CDL exam and almost all get jobs in trucking and in their communities.



Launched with federal adult basic education and workforce development grant funds from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the program later received a High Demand Workforce Development grant to refine the program.

Most of the employers produce agricultural products (J.R. Simplot, National Frozen Foods, Wilbur-Ellis, Harvest Transport Inc., among others). They need drivers to be able to move products and raw materials to and from their facilities. Average annual earnings for students who participate in the program exceed \$27,000. Even during this recession, graduates are getting hired. A recent survey of the most recent graduates reached 12 out of 15 participants, all of whom were employed in the trucking industry.

The North Central Workforce Development Council and the Opportunity Industrialization Center have contributed to the program's success through student referrals, tuition support for eligible participants, and by addressing other barriers to completion and job placement.

Big Bend Community College's I-BEST Commercial Driver's License program has helped a traditionally underserved population move from seasonal, low-wage work into more year-round, living-wage jobs. By upskilling workers into high employer demand positions critical to the region's key industry, this program has helped strengthen the economy.

POST-TRAINING SUCCESS:

Median income of 2007-2008 participants before and after completion (three quarters before and after) indicate a 40 percent increase in annual wages or an increase of over \$8,000.

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