

Grant Helps Workers Reimagine Careers

State provides \$13 million to two Arkansas colleges to meet job training needs

By Marty Cook
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Officials at two Arkansas educational institutions are confident a federal grant will pay big dividends to Arkansans trying to reformat their careers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The money comes from the CARES Act of 2020, which Congress approved to help offset the pandemic's financial toll. The U.S. Department of Education dedicated a \$126.7 million portion of the act to eight states as the Reimagine Workforce Preparation Grant to provide "new educational opportunities and pathways" to help people return to work.

The grant provided \$13.58 million to the Arkansas Division of Workforce Services, which oversees the state's program. The DWS awarded slightly more than \$10 million to the University of Arkansas Global Campus, the online education platform of the UA System. Shorter College, a two-year private college in North Little Rock, received about \$3 million.

The two schools offer noncredit online classes in various fields for durations that range from a few weeks to as long as 18 months. The UA Global Campus has 15 fields of study for Reimagine participants that include health care, construction and machine maintenance.

The grant pays the course's costs for the students.

"It is intended to help Arkansans who have been economically impacted by COVID," said Tara Dryer, the senior managing director at the UA Global Campus. "There are a lot of qualifying factors. If somebody needs training to get a better job or to get a job, they should check out our website. Almost everybody will qualify for training in some sort of fashion."

Shorter College, one of two historically Black colleges participating in the program, offers eight fields of study, including human resources, wine and spirit education, entrepreneurship and IBM-certified computer technology courses.

Angee Valentine, Shorter College's interim director of the program, said the grant is to give Arkansans who are unemployed or underemployed an opportunity for more promising career paths.

"It gives them the skill set they need to get medium to higher-paying jobs," Valentine said. "We need our students to be able to work and thrive in the 21st century. They are getting their 21st century skills so they can make informed decisions."



Early Results

The Reimagine programs started a little over a year ago so there isn't a lot of data on its success.

But Dryer said the program has proved popular at the UA Global Campus, with more than 400 accepted applicants. She said some of the early enrollees are just now becoming "completers," and she will have more proof of the program's effectiveness as time goes on.

The Reimagine Grant is a three-year program scheduled to expire in October 2023.

such as the IBM program, which lasts just three weeks per skill badge, that will be an easier task to accomplish.

"We are not limited to any number," Valentine said. "We are just expanding. We enroll for a certain amount of time and once we hit [the deadline], the applicants roll over. We get them in as quickly as we can."

Valentine said Shorter's first cohort had six students, but there are currently three active cohorts that comprise about 60.

The feedback from the first year of the

"So far, in the second year of the grant, UA and Shorter College have over 350 participants enrolled. Things are really picking up for our Reimagine partners — DWS is excited about their early achievements and looks forward to even more participant success stories in the future."

Brighter Days

O. Bailejone Lagoye is one of two first completers of the IBM program, through which he earned his badge in enterprise design thinking. Lagoye, 44, found himself unemployed and depressed after his mother died. He joined the Reimagine program after previous jobs in various fields, mostly in IT.

He is set to start an internship soon.

"I was out of work," Lagoye said. "The fact that I was on unemployment for so long was frustrating. I'm just grateful for the opportunity."

"I'm definitely excited about the future. [I] look at the job market and the types of positions and the pay rate for those positions that I am now skilled at. It helps me be more prepared for the future. I'll have some insight other people won't have. That will make me more valuable. I am pretty optimistic going forward."

Valentine said the Reimagine program isn't just about the classes, though. She said Shorter College provides free laptops and internet access to students, tutoring and job placement.

The DWS grant also provided money to iDatafy of Little Rock for its SmartResume service to help students after they complete courses. Valentine said the program tries to serve a student's every need.

"It is an opportunity for students to take care of themselves, to take care of their families," Valentine said. "It opens

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[ANGEE VALENTINE, INTERIM DIRECTOR OF THE REIMAGINE PROGRAM, SHORTER COLLEGE]

"We are hoping to serve about 2,000 more if we can," Dryer said. "We have a lot of growing. Clearly we want to get more grant funding to continue it."

Shorter College hasn't seen the numbers the UA Global Campus has seen, but the small college found success in its implementation. Valentine, who was hired in August 2020 shortly after the program began, said Shorter College launched a new cohort in January and hopes to enroll another in March.

She said the goal is to have a rolling enrollment so interested students won't have to wait for the next class. For certifi-

cation is providing optimism to the Division of Workforce Services.

"In the first year of the grant, a lot of time went into implementation, so UA and Shorter College were laying the foundation and doing things like hiring personnel, getting policies in place, setting up websites, recruiting participants and promoting the programs," DWS spokesman Zoe Calkins said in an email to *Arkansas Business*. "Combined, UA and Shorter College had 124 participants at the end of the first year. Many of those participants are still in training, as the programs range from six to 18 months.

up the world of education to them. It is empowering. Some of our students come from some very, very challenging backgrounds.

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