



**NEW MEXICO
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Higher Education Outcomes Supporting Technical Professional Workforce Development Goals

State of the Skills Gap in New Mexico

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ABSTRACT New Mexico's most urgent workforce challenge is no longer simply attracting students to higher education; it is producing enough graduates in technical career pathways to meet employer demand. The skills gap in New Mexico is defined by a major mismatch: while 4-year baccalaureate programs maintain consistent enrollment and graduation numbers, industries have difficulty identifying qualified candidates who completed a technical professional training program, thereby filling technical professional jobs. Significant labor shortages persist in key sectors such as construction, transportation and healthcare. The decline in the training program completion rate (-16.6%), despite an increase in enrollment (+3%), is the most significant finding, suggesting that retention and completion, and not just enrollment, may be the main barriers to technical professional training outcomes in New Mexico.

Introduction

New Mexico's most urgent workforce challenge is no longer simply attracting students to higher education; it is producing enough graduates in technical career pathways to meet employer demand. Despite substantial investment in workforce initiatives, employers across construction, transportation, manufacturing, healthcare, and skilled trades continue to report severe shortages of qualified workers. The New Mexico business community consistently reports through surveys, studies, and messaging that workforce development is the single most pressing issue facing the state's economy. Moreover, technical professional roles are emphasized as the most difficult to hire due to a persistent skills gap. In response, the New Mexico Chamber of Commerce Foundation launched the best-in-class workforce development program Be Pro Be Proud on November 9th, 2023, to address the growing "Skills Gap" in high-wage, high-demand technical professions. After more than two years of operating and thousands of participants, we sought to determine how high school graduates since the program's launch are pursuing training programs in the targeted career paths and completing them. To answer this question, we investigated if there are enough graduates of training programs in the targeted career paths to fill the number of openings across the state. We examined enrollment and completion data provided by the New Mexico Higher Education Department and 13 departments of independent community colleges to appraise the situation.

The skills gap in New Mexico is defined by a major mismatch: while 4-year baccalaureate programs maintain consistent enrollment and graduation numbers, industries have difficulty identifying qualified candidates who completed a technical professional training program, thereby filling technical professional jobs. With over 32,000 young adults (teens to early twenties) neither working nor in school, there is ample opportunity to expand training program enrollment and subsequently completions, to address workforce challenges. Be Pro Be Proud's pre- and post-tour experience survey results highlighted substantial improvement in student perceptions of these technical professions. However, a key focus of this analysis is tracking behavioral change and assessing whether these positive attitudes translate into immediate career choices.

This analysis reveals a disparate situation. New Mexico offers very attractive financial incentives, such as low or no college tuition, which has helped attract many students to certain programs. WIOA-funded training options are also available as a resource to students to incentivize pursuit of careers in industries targeted for growth. However, significant labor shortages persist in key sectors such as construction, transportation and healthcare. Indeed, these sectors are among the most critical occupational areas in New Mexico's labor market. Students are choosing certain programs, while the market has a greater need for workers in other technical professions.

Methodology & Sources

We collected enrollment and graduation data from the New Mexico Higher Education Department for academic years 2023–24 and 2024–25. These figures were compared against statewide job openings data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics across the career pathways highlighted by Be Pro Be Proud. The Foundation also collected data from the following institutions:

Institution	Main Campus	Campus, Enrollment
CCC – Clovis Community College	Clovis, NM	Clovis-2,342
CNM - Central New Mexico Community College	Albuquerque, NM	All-19,342 Incl. Main, Westside, South Valley, Rio Rancho, Montoya

Institution	Main Campus	Campus, Enrollment
ENMU - Eastern New Mexico University	Portales, NM	Main-5,725 ENMU-Ruidoso-773 ENMU-Roswell
LCC - Luna Community College	Las Vegas, NM	Las Vegas-743
NMJC - New Mexico Junior College	Hobbs, NM	Hobbs-2,235
NMSU - New Mexico State University	Las Cruces, NM	Main-15,408 Alamogordo-1,152 Dona Ana-7,200 Grants-754
NNMC - Northern New Mexico College	Espanola, NM	1,425
NTU - Navajo Technical University	Crownpoint, NM	1,704
SENM - Southeast New Mexico College	Carlsbad, NM	469
SFCC - Santa Fe Community College	Santa Fe, NM	4,469
SJC - San Juan College	Farmington, NM	6,452
UNM - University of New Mexico	Albuquerque, NM	Main-23,124 Gallup-1,687 Los Alamos-349 Taos-896 Valencia County (Los Lunas)-921
WNMU - Western New Mexico University	Silver City, NM	3,531

For purposes of this analysis, “technical training programs” refers to professional certifications, apprenticeships and two-year degree programs that support skills-based hiring pathways. To establish clear analytical parameters, this definition excludes four-year baccalaureate degrees and other traditional academic degree programs.

Figure 1 shows the professions broken down by industry, the number of occupational openings in New Mexico, and the number of enrollments in programs supporting that profession.

Targeted Professions	Projected Number of Annual Openings in NM (2022-2032)	Program Enrollments in 2023-2024 statewide	Program Enrollments 2024-2025 statewide
Manufacturing & Tech			
Automation & Robotics Specialist, aka Mechatronic	No data available	22	26
Welder	230	1588	1756
Construction			
Carpenter	410	139	129
Electrician	590	318	424
HVAC Tech	200	281	318
Plumber	320	68	68
Transportation			
CDL Truck Driver	1500	191	128
Diesel Tech	150	84	83
Heavy Equipment Operator	40	9	11
Healthcare			
First Responder, EMT	130	1446	1357
Surgical Assistant	30	283	273
Medical Assistant	1240	440	453

Figure 1

Analysis of Enrollments – Trends reveal student interest and labor demand misalignment.

1) General enrollment trends

The data shows a total of 9,897 students enrolled across 13 technical programs during the two years:

- Academic Year 2023-24: 4,869 students
- Academic Year 2024-25: 5,026 students

Overall, we observe a 3% growth rate in terms of enrollment from academic year 2023-2024 to academic year 2024-2025.

2) Analysis by sector

Enrollment trends vary by sector. Some fields are chosen by enrollees at a higher rate than the market demands, while others are facing a critical shortage of enrollees. This means that where enrollment is

lagging, program completions must also be lagging. These enrollment and completion shortages for crucial occupations threaten our state's infrastructure, access to health care, and economic growth.

- Manufacturing & Tech**

There is a solid pipeline in traditional technical professions such as welding with 230 job openings annually and more than 1,500 students enrolled. The training pipeline should easily meet the demand. On the other hand, advanced technical fields have lower enrollment numbers such as programs in automation and robotics (only 22 and 26 students). Students may prefer traditional technical professions even if advanced technology is growing.

- Construction**

This sector, in aggregate and within specific industries, is unable to train enough workers to meet development and infrastructure needs. Technical professions such as carpentry (410 openings vs ~130 students) and plumbing (320 openings vs 68 students), are facing severe shortages. Electricians are also affected by this shortage, although enrollment numbers are rising from academic year 2023-2024 to academic year 2024-2025. Notably, HVAC technician is the only occupation in this sector that is yielding sufficient enrollees that could fill available positions, with a steady and sufficient flow of students and growing enrollment.

- Transportation**

This sector is one of the biggest economic bottlenecks in New Mexico. For CDL Truck Drivers, there is a relatively large demand of 1,500 openings, but fewer than 200 students are enrolled in training programs for that occupation. Diesel engine technicians and heavy equipment operators also face significant shortages. The number of applicants is only about half of the local labor demand with 94 enrollments for 190 number of openings.

- Healthcare**

There is a solid pipeline for Emergency Medical Technology (EMT) and Surgical Assistants, where the supply of enrollees is sufficient to satisfy or exceed the openings. On the other hand, there is a critical shortage for Medical Assistant. The market has 1,240 openings, but there are only around 450 students enrolled to fill them.

Figure 2 shows the professions broken out by industry, the number of occupational openings in NM, and the number of completions of programs supporting that profession.

Targeted Profession	Projected Number of Annual Openings in NM (2022-2032)	Program Completions 2023-2024 statewide	Program Completions 2024-2025 statewide
Manufacturing & Tech			
Automation & Robotics Specialist, aka Mechatronic	No data available	18	8
Welder	230	461	428
Construction			
Carpenter	410	58	39
Electrician	590	140	184

Targeted Profession	Projected Number of Annual Openings in NM (2022-2032)	Program Completions 2023-2024 statewide	Program Completions 2024-2025 statewide
HVAC Tech	200	77	65
Plumber	320	No data available	No data available
Transportation			
CDL Truck Driver	1500	185	84
Diesel Tech	150	51	41
Heavy Equipment Operator	40	9	8
Healthcare			
First Responder, EMT	130	610	486
Surgical Assistant	30	46	53
Medical Assistant	1240	94	62

Figure 2

Analysis of Completions – Completion rates lag despite enrollment growth.

3) General completion trends

The data shows a total of 3,207 students that graduated from the 13 technical programs during the two years. Completion is based on the total number of students that obtained a professional certificate or an associates degree.

- Academic Year 2023-24: 1,749 students graduated
- Academic Year 2024-25: 1,458 students graduated

Overall, we can observe a 16.6% decline in terms of total program completions from academic year 2023-2024 to academic year 2024-2025; even though total enrollment grew 3% over the same period. This figure demonstrates that although more students are entering programs, a smaller share is finishing them, and thus the skills gap persists.

4) Analysis by sector

• Manufacturing & Tech

Completions in this technical profession confirm the enrollment finding of a solid pipeline that easily meets the demand. In welding, the number of completions is roughly 2x annual openings. While data is lagging for emerging technology occupations, the figures show that there are qualified graduates ready to enter the workforce.

• Construction

The completion data confirms the enrollment trends numbers. In the carpenter occupation, only 14% in AY 2023-2024 and 9.5% in AY 2024-2025 of demand is being met and completions are falling faster than enrollment. Although Electrician is the one construction profession seeing improvement in its completion

numbers year over year. Regarding plumbers, no completion data was available, so the severity of the shortage implied by enrollment can't be confirmed or refuted here, worth noting as a data gap.

- **Transportation**

CDL Truck Driver completion data confirms the steep shortfall highlighted by enrollment figures when compared to annual job openings in the state. Diesel Tech also covers roughly a quarter to a third of the 150 openings, consistent with the enrollment-based shortage finding. Heavy Equipment Operator numbers are stable but still only meet about 20-22% of the 30 openings.

- **Healthcare**

Regarding EMT, completions still far exceed the 130 openings, reinforcing the solid pipeline enrollment finding, though the 20% year over year drop in completions is worth monitoring. A similar trend is observed for surgical assistants although the number of completions has grown year over year. In contrast, medical assistant is the most severe gap in the dataset. Completions dropped significantly meeting only 5 to 7.6% of the demand.

Sector Analysis Conclusion

The completion data confirms most of the enrollment-based conclusions; however, it also adds an important correction, HVAC can't be classified as a sufficient pipeline sector with very low completion numbers, and this completion crisis is masked by enrollment growth.

The decline in the completion rate (-16.6%), despite the increase in enrollment (+3%), is the most significant finding, suggesting that retention and completion, and not just enrollment, may be the main barriers to technical professional training outcomes in New Mexico.

Additional Factors to Consider and Questions for Further Consideration

- **Lack of infrastructure**

According to the FY25 Workforce, Internship, and Apprenticeship GRO Appropriations Outcomes report from the New Mexico Higher Education Department, some colleges lack the physical and staffing infrastructure needed to launch certain programs. Building this capacity is underway, but it remains a constraint on enrollment growth in shortage areas.

- **Adult learners**

The average participant age of 35 from FY25 Workforce, Internship, and Apprenticeship GRO Appropriations Outcomes report reflects strong demand from adults balancing education with work and family. Program design, including scheduling, financial aid, and wraparound support must account for the realities of this population to improve both access and completion.

However, this high age average highlights a critical gap among the 18–34 demographic, indicating that younger New Mexicans are delaying entry into these training programs immediately after high school due to broader socioeconomic shifts or prolonged transitions into the workforce. To improve both access and completion across all age groups, future program designs must not only provide scheduling flexibility, financial aid, and wraparound support for adult learners, but also strengthen pre-apprenticeship pathways and K-12 integration to capture younger students earlier.

- **Data Availability, Accuracy, and Consistency**

This analysis focuses on key metrics of success related to higher education and workforce development priorities. In the course of researching the data we discovered that while overall trends represented in data sets remain consistent, specific data sets that should have shown corroborating numbers did not match. It would be beneficial for researchers and the public to be able to identify and interpret readily available and consistently accurate data sets about important outcomes. Standardization of reporting formats and procedures as well as centralization of user-friendly data dashboards could have significant impact on every citizen's ability to understand and act on important information regarding workforce development and economic development.

Questions for further Consideration

- How can business leaders, industry partners, and partner institutions better guide students toward high-shortage careers (such as plumbing, commercial driving, and medical assistant) while maintaining student interest?
- What specific barriers prevent colleges from expanding capacity in shortage programs? Are the primary constraints instructor availability, equipment costs, facility space, or other factors?
- How do apprenticeships program statistics relate to higher education statistics and what models can be scaled to address the completion challenge?
- How do apprenticeship and training programs offered by trade associations, companies, labor unions, and other non-higher education institutions factor into meeting the demand for technical professionals?
- Do students in high demand technical programs leave before completing their associate degree or certification at higher rates than students in baccalaureate programs, and if so, does early employment play a measurable role in that decision?
- How do the 2 WIOA-approved training providers (independent community colleges) in NM perform compared to other institutions? How can a benchmark of WIOA training outcomes be established?

Conclusion

The data is clear. New Mexico has no trouble attracting students to higher education. The challenge is ensuring that these students pursue careers where they are needed most.

The occupations with the most severe labor shortages are medical assistants, CDL-certified truck drivers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, diesel technicians, and heavy equipment operators. These are not niche jobs, they are the trades and professions that keep New Mexico's healthcare system, infrastructure, and economy running.

For Be Pro Be Proud and other workforce development initiatives to have the greatest possible impact in the coming years, these initiatives must not only promote technical careers, but actively connect students with the specific career paths where New Mexico needs them most.

Closing New Mexico's skills gap will require more than increasing awareness of technical professions. It will require aligning education, workforce development, industry, and public policy around the occupations most essential to the state's economic future. The opportunity is substantial. The challenge now is converting student interest into sustained enrollment, successful completion, and employment in the careers where our state needs talent most.

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