BUILDING BLOCKS

How offering micro-credentials and rethinking traditional programming is training people for the real world of work

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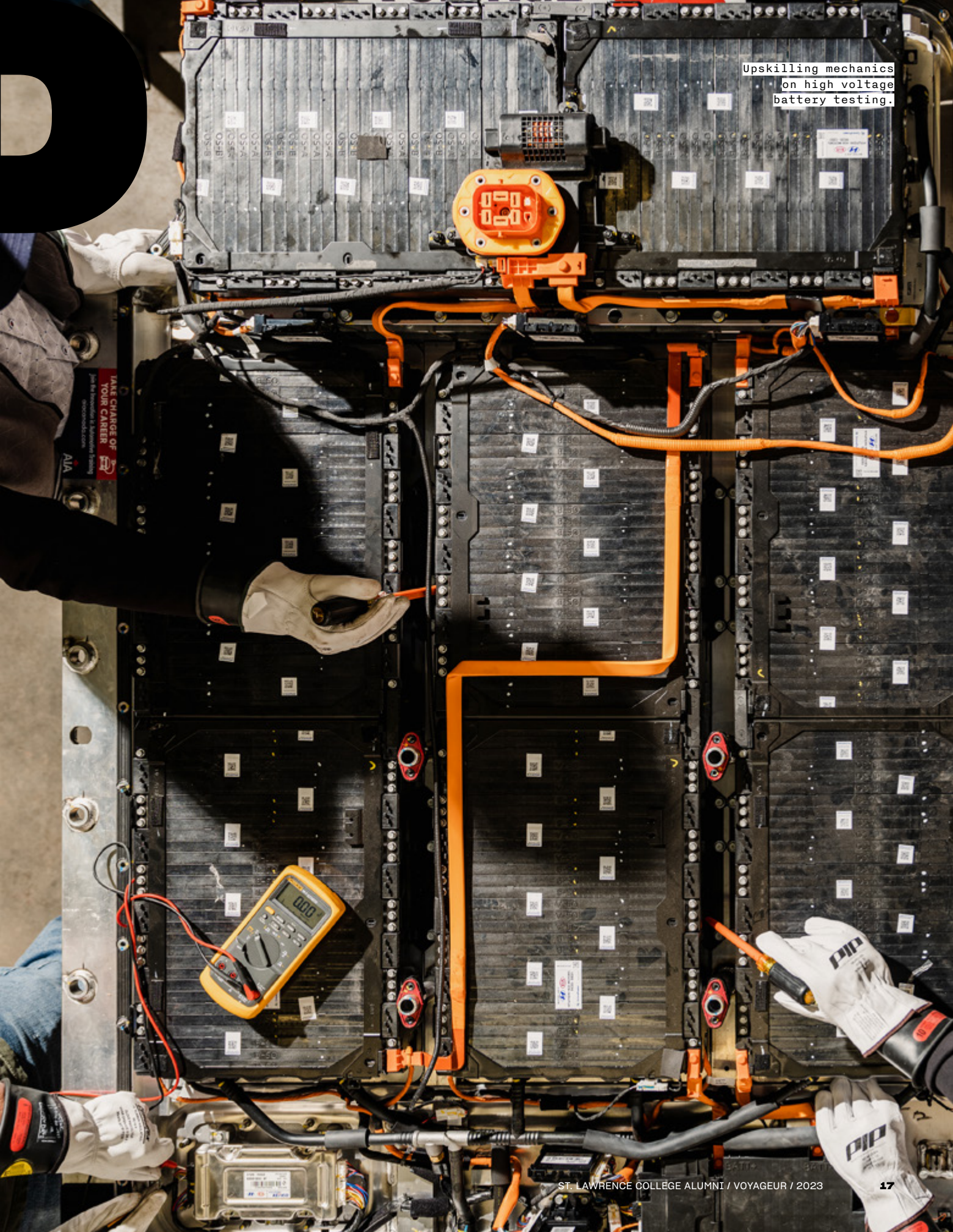

Upskilling mechanics on high voltage battery testing.

Some students are entering the workforce after a number of years. Others want to learn the latest technologies—or offer their services to new clientele. Some are accessing online learning tools they wouldn't otherwise have access to in their home community. Others are trying to overcome major barriers to break into the job market. All of them are being helped by St. Lawrence College.

Addressing hair by texture

Think about your relationship with your hair stylist—or your barber. Having trust in the person who cuts your hair can be so important. If they understand your hair, then they will help define your style and how you present yourself to the world. A great haircut gives confidence. And if you find someone you trust, you'll probably be loyal to them for years. They're part of your community.

But what if you can't find someone who understands you or your hair type? Different types of hair require much different approaches: in cutting, chemical treatments, styling, products, and upkeep.

Professionals in the hair-care industry categorize hair types, from fine to coarse (in terms of texture) and from straight to coiled (in terms of curl). What works for a client with type 2A hair (wavy and fine) will not work for a client with type 4C hair (coiled and thick). And a stylist who has never welcomed a Black woman with type 4C hair as a client may not have experience in cutting or styling her specific hair type. This can be a barrier to that client feeling trust, confidence, and a sense of community.

The Texture with Confidence program aims to change that for Kingston-area stylists and barbers. The free program is funded by the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development and provides practical skills training to local haircare professionals so that they can support new and existing clients with a variety of hair textures and curl.

Started in October 2022, the inaugural eight-module program attracted 28 hair stylists, barbers, salon owners, and apprentices.

Breaking barriers—textured hair training for hairstylists in Kingston, ON.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SPARK CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Small courses with a big impact

Micro-credentials are short, competency-based courses that can be taken individually, or as part of a larger program. Some of the College's healthcare micro-credential courses are targeted to new entrants in the workforce; others provide skills upgrades for incumbent workers.

In 2021, SLC implemented a number of new micro-credentials to address pandemic-related needs in hospitals. Although not a micro-credential, the College partnered with Canadian Healthcare Housekeepers' Association to create a training program for Environmental Service Aid workers with an emphasis on new standards for cleaning and disinfecting healthcare environments.

The College also worked with more than 40 healthcare providers in the region to provide new online training for their staff. In the College's communities of Kingston, Cornwall, and Brockville, more than 160 Registered Nurses were able to upgrade their critical care skills through part-time study.

Foot care is an important component of health care, especially for older people and those with diabetes. The College created two online foot-care courses: an in-depth course for RNs and a more general course for personal support workers and aides.

The online nature of these courses empowered healthcare staff to learn new skills in a safe manner. "The training provided by St. Lawrence College elevated the ability of our staff to help keep our facility and residents safe during the pandemic, but also increased their skills and knowledge," says Vincent Lazore, the administrator for the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne's Tsiionkwanonhso:te Long Term Care Facility.

A rapid response

"We're like a rapid response team," says Dr. John Conrad. "We want to respond to an industry demand for short duration training of 8 to 26 weeks." John is the Director, Innovation and Business Engagement for St. Lawrence College. It's his job to break down the barriers to employment by identifying training—and the trainers—that SLC can provide.

In some cases, a need arises as a concern. For instance, an organization wants to support its community and attract new residents with the services it offers; the health care and hair care programs are good examples.

In other cases, a local employer identifies a need for employees with a specific skill set or training. "We try to find those people, get them the training, and match them with the employer," says John.

When working with an employer who needs to fill a role, John and his colleagues may start with a job description, but then they'll dig deeper. After all, a basic job description doesn't always cover what an employee will need to know and do every day. Site visits are arranged to see how the workplace operates, what their employees do and how they do it.

Micro-credential courses and non credentialed training are built around those competencies, so SLC can provide exactly the right training that meets industry standards and that will enable their students to become employees that succeed in that industry.

With the increase in demand for electric and hybrid cars in the last few years, there's been a need for

Saifullah Sanaye (second from right) developed the curriculum for the Electric Vehicle Training at SLC and instructs students on the differences of working on electric and hybrid vehicles.

mechanics who understand those vehicles. "It's a very different type of maintenance," says John, "so we've been working to upskill people who already fix cars so that they understand the electric vehicle and the battery systems. We try to be very responsive, to get a good sense of what's going on in the industry."

SLC's Cornwall campus now offers upskilling modules on EV cars for already licensed automotive technicians, as well as a separate course for job seekers who want to enter the field. Through the government of Ontario funding, the Automotive Industries Association of Canada (AIA), participants receive free training that SLC was hired to develop and deliver. The College also secured a vehicle and close to $300,000 of donated equipment to support future electric vehicle maintenance programs.

The College has connections in the work world; it can connect with students who want to upgrade their skills or learn new ones. So, how do they bridge those two with qualified instructors?

"We have a roster of trainers whose talents we tap into regularly," says John. "They can be full-time faculty, part-time faculty, or approved vendors who will deliver the training for the College." And for courses that are completely new, John and the entire Innovation and Business Engagement team will reach out to their professional network to help identify experts in their field.

Those new connections aren't just with industry professionals. There's immense value in collaborating with other colleges: to share ideas for courses, take the pulse of the job market in other communities, and collaborate on program delivery.

Take the Steel and Aluminum program, a targeted program that ran from 2019 to 2021 in partnership with four other colleges. Funded by SkillsAdvance Ontario, the program took a regional approach to address workforce development. SLC and its partners worked with 36 employers in nine Ontario communities; together, they delivered 114 training opportunities; trained more than 1,000 incumbent workers and 28 job seekers; and developed five micro-credentials in metallurgy.

"The large workforce development projects where we have worked in a consortium with the College's in Eastern Ontario have made us less competitive and more collaborative when it comes to workforce development," says John.

Members of the consortium that delivered the steel and aluminum training are now busy exploring other opportunities for future collaboration.

Building blocks for the future

Some students aren't getting ready for the job market—not yet anyway. They're exploring what to do after high school with some hands-on learning with SLC's Mobile Training Labs. The labs come equipped in two enormous trailers that visit different schools on request. Trailers are parked at the school for a week, and students from grades 7 to 12 get the opportunity to try out some new skills and talk to professionals in specific trades.

Neil Kapila relishes the opportunity to engage students in his trade—welding—and to give them a taste of the work.

"I talk to them about what welding actually is, and I let them know about the two-year program at SLC," he says. He discusses where his training has taken him—from Sarnia to Kuwait, and all the interesting work he

has done. “And then they get to try it out on a welding simulator. That really piques their interest—and it’s completely safe.”

The idea for the trailers came a few years ago, explains Jamie Puddicombe, Manager, Skills, Training and Economic Development. “We heard from a number of communities that they wanted more engagement with the College. But, for instance, the welding program isn’t offered on each campus. So, we decided to bring the equipment, the professionals, and the engagement to these communities.”

“We’ve been to Morrisburg, Gananoque, Smiths Falls... We’ve issued micro-credentials to 1,800 students in the last year, in carpentry, culinary, welding, and electrical. These kids are making a connection to the trades and to St. Lawrence College. They’re thinking of the next step in their life and what path they want to take.”

Meeting change head-on

Micro-credential courses aren’t the only offerings at SLC that are moving in step with changing technologies and employment opportunities. Two of the College’s certificate programs—one established and one brand-new—also demonstrate a nimble approach to creating curricula to meet demand—now and in the future.

A unique program in Canada, the Music and Digital Media program has been around for at least 15 years. But it is changing all the time, keeping pace with the ever-fluid technology and work options available to musicians and media artists.

The program’s integrated arts focus combines music training with the digital arts, including video production and sound engineering.

Students in the program learn to be adaptable and self-sufficient as artists—and entrepreneurs, if that is the path they choose. They learn about funding for the arts and how to put together a grant application. They learn about copyright law, to protect their intellectual property. They also learn, during their studies, to collaborate with artists in other media. And this builds more awareness of their potential career paths.

“In the very first semester,” says program coordinator Mark Bergin, “we touch on stage props and lighting, dance, art, and music—and how it all fits together.” Students graduate ready to work in everything from musical theatre to video game music. They also learn new digital technologies.

“We’re adding a new course called Advanced Technologies,” says Mark. “But I don’t even know what will be in the course next year!” he laughs. “The nature of the course will depend on what comes along next.”

The College has also created a new graduate program to proactively address the darker side of technology.

The Information and Communications Technology Council of Canada estimates that tens of thousands of additional cybersecurity professionals will be needed by 2025 in Canada.

SLC launched its Cybersecurity program in September: geared toward students with an IT background who want to sharpen their skills in protecting valuable workplace data. Courses are offered in everything from cloud security to computer forensics. Students also work on case studies based on real industry scenarios. All the

Ariane Morin (left) learning the intricacies of welding.

Carpentry student Heidi Sloan (below) demonstrates the type of skilled trades SLC teaches.

A fresh start

Vocational training for inmates preparing for release

For more than a decade, SLC has partnered with CORCAN, the employment arm of Correctional Services of Canada, to deliver vocational training to inmates preparing for release. This training can be integral to helping formerly incarcerated persons successfully enter the workforce.

Participants learn practical skills in areas like small engine repair, horticulture, fruit tree pruning, and carpentry. And as they progress, their work is put to good use, from the vegetables grown by horticulture students for their institution's kitchen, to the community bus shelter recently built by carpentry students.

Each participant receives recognition of their training that can be shown to a potential employer or used to pursue further education upon their release. The program is set up to help these participants overcome major barriers to employment and successful reintegration after incarceration. The College works closely with CORCAN to identify pertinent workforce needs.

Carpentry for the residential housing market is a red-hot skill to have. Len Winsor taught a six-week carpentry course to inmates this year. Most of his students had absolutely no experience in construction. Len started them off with the basics of tool safety, then went on to teach them framing, flooring, insulation, and siding. "We try and touch on all the components of building a house," he says. But as they go through their building project, these students are strengthening other—equally important—skills. "We treat the course like a job site, says Len. "You show up on time. You work cooperatively with your team. It goes so much further than the carpentry," he continues. "It's helping these guys move into the next phase of their life and make better decisions for themselves. It's a pretty powerful program."

It's not a typical college classroom: CORCAN instructors teach their courses with inmates within the walls of their institution. "It's not a cushy teaching environment, says Jamie Puddicombe, "and it's made more difficult by the fact that you're working with a vulnerable population." But the instructors are making connections with their students, empowering them to learn valuable skills. "Many of these students are receiving the first certificate they've ever had. They're very proud of that—and they should be! A little bit of confidence and some new skills go a long way once they're back out and contributing to society."

Technicians learn the precision required for electric vehicle maintenance.

program's instructors have extensive real-world experience; each one teaches a course while maintaining their work outside the College.

This is strategic, says Brad Barbeau, Associate Dean, Applied Science and Computing. Through their ongoing work, instructors are acutely aware of the latest developments in cybercrime and technology; they can bring this insight to their courses. Their students learn about the real-time evolution of cybercrime and how to tackle it proactively. "This is the tremendous value that part-time instructors bring to the College: their lived experiences," says Brad.

This is one of the common threads among these programs, whether they offer micro-credentials or a graduate certificate. Each one connects students with instructors who are both experts in their fields and passionate about sharing their knowledge.

Small in-person class sizes mean that each student gets to know their peers and connect with their instructors. In the Music and Digital Media program, bands are often formed in the first semester. In the Texture by Design program, apprentice stylists connect with hair care professionals with 30 years of experience. In the CORCAN courses, students get positive one-on-one feedback from their instructor.

And for online courses, students can pursue their credentials on their own time, unrushed but still connected to the wider industry and their peers, wherever they live.

All of them can see the intrinsic value of their studies.

Community connections are made. Future opportunities are imagined.

Great things can happen when you create building blocks to a new career.