



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## A Strong Workforce for Wild, Wonderful West Virginia

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Dr. Sarah Armstrong Tucker is the Chancellor of the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia. Prior to her current role, Dr. Tucker served as Director of Planning and Research for the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia. Her work focuses on college access, particularly for first-generation rural students, and expanding partnerships with business and industry to create a world-class skilled workforce in the Mountain State.

At West Virginia’s community and technical colleges, we pride ourselves on building a strong workforce pipeline to our state’s most important industries. Without a doubt, connecting our students to the vast opportunities in West Virginia’s tourism industry is at the heart and center of that work.

Our nine institutions and their satellite campuses are situated near some of the most highly traveled and well-loved destination spots in our state. These are places where resorts are for relaxing, parks are for exploring, mountains are for climbing and rivers are for rafting. And in between all of that activity, there are career opportunities – close to home – for West Virginians.

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A community college education in the Mountain State is incredibly powerful. It opens the door to high-demand jobs, like those in tourism. It allows people to earn credentials where they live, and it’s adaptable to students’ busy schedules. And, thanks to a new and forward-looking investment by the state, it’s now more affordable than ever before.

Only one-third of West Virginia’s population has the training they need beyond high school,



yet three-quarters of the jobs in our current economy require post-secondary education or training. Recognizing how critical it is for our state to fill this gap, the West Virginia Legislature passed legislation in March creating the WV Invests grant – a “last-dollar-in” financial aid program designed to cover the cost of tuition and fees for certificate or associate degree programs in high-demand fields.

Through this grant program, students use other federal and/or state grant awards first, with WV Invests covering the remaining costs for tuition and fees at one of our nine community and technical colleges. This grant serves adults who want to go to school for the first time or finish what they started years before, as well as high school students enrolled in technical pathways that lead to community college programs.

We worked with the West Virginia Department of Commerce to identify eligible academic programs at our schools in high-demand fields, so our students are earning their credentials for the careers that matter in West Virginia – and so they can continue to live here, work here and raise their families here. When it comes to linking our students to the fun and rewarding career opportunities in tourism, the academic programs covered by WV Invests fit the bill.

A student at Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, for example, can earn an



*The Food Service Management associates degree program at Pierpont Community and Technical College offers students four focus areas, including: Dietary Manager, Resort & Hotel Management, Culinary Arts and Pastry and Baking Arts.*

associate degree in Powersports Technology, arming them with the skills they need to service, repair and maintain powersports equipment – including ATVs and personal watercraft. In a region that is the proud home of the Hatfield-McCoy trail system, programs like this can lead to great jobs.

At New River Community and Technical College – located near some of the state’s most popular destinations, including the New River Gorge – a student can pursue a degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management, designed for students looking for careers directly rooted in tourism. Or a Blue Ridge Community and Technical College student may want to study Culinary Arts or Business Operations, given the Eastern Panhandle’s treasured points of interest – from the Bavarian Inn to Berkeley Springs State Park and Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

Opportunities like this exist at all of our institutions and, thanks to WV Invests, they are more accessible now than ever before. Students who qualify for WV Invests must maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 2.0 and register for at least six credit hours each semester, while also completing drug tests, doing community service and committing to living in the state for at least two years after graduation.

Last fall, Governor Jim Justice announced that West Virginia’s tourism industry grew in 2017 for the first time in five years, with traveler spending growing at a rate of 30 percent above the national rate that year. That exciting growth, coupled with opportunities now afforded by the WV Invests grant, can mean truly transformative change for our state’s economy and in the lives of West Virginians who want to work hard to create a better future for themselves and their loved ones.

By working hand-in-hand with the tourism industry to tailor our curriculum to our state’s most in-demand jobs, we are growing a strong workforce for West Virginia – and for all of its wild and wonderful adventures and places. ▽

A full list of programs eligible for WV Invests can be found at [wvinvests.org](http://wvinvests.org).