

# Accelerating the solar workforce

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When local school systems decided to add solar arrays to their buildings, regional environmental nonprofit Appalachian Voices and other members of the Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia counted it as a victory in their six-year efforts to develop a renewable energy cluster in Virginia's coalfield counties.



Owen Swinney completed the Solar Workforce Accelerator program in July, earning credit hours toward an associate degree. Photo by Earl Neikirk

In January, Southwest Virginia Community College and Mountain Empire Community College launched the Solar Workforce Accelerator program to provide the workers to install those arrays. The effort was funded via a \$225,000 grant from the Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority.

"Solar market development has been this chicken-and-egg problem in areas like Southwest Virginia," says Autumn Long, project manager for the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund, Appalachian Voices' program promoting solar projects.

"There's an acknowledged need for workforce training and diversification and opportunities for the labor force," she says, but employing a solar workforce requires "a sustained demand for solar development in the region."

The accelerator program entails seven days of eight-hour trainings followed by an eight-week apprenticeship with Got Electric LLC, the company installing local schools' solar panels. Students get \$500 for completing the seven-day training. The apprenticeship pays \$17 an hour, just above Lee County's median household income.

Graduates are over halfway to solar array installer certifications, which they can complete later if they choose, and have nine credit hours toward associate energy technology degrees. They may also have jobs.

"They pretty much told us if we wanted a job, they could get something situated for us," says Owen Swinney, one of 10 students in the first cohort. Swinney, who graduated from high school in June and finished the accelerator program in July, says he might accept the offer, if he can work around the energy technology courses he plans to take at Mountain Empire Community College this fall.

MECC plans another cohort next summer, says Matthew Rose, dean of industrial technology. Southwest Virginia Community College is developing its program. The two colleges plan to educate three cohorts each, with eight to 15 students per group, during the next three years.

The Solar Finance Fund plans to help maintain market demand by providing grants, much of it from the Appalachian Regional Commission, and technical assistance to local governments and nonprofits interested in solar power.

"This is a great opportunity, especially for the future of jobs in this area," Swinney says. "I think solar's going to be here for a while."

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