



Working Learners

Educating our entire workforce for success in the 21st century

Louis Soares June 2009



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Executive summary

On May 8 President Barack Obama encouraged those who have lost their jobs to “no longer just look for a new job, but also to prepare for a better job.” The administration quickly proposed changes to the primary college-tuition grant program—Pell Grants—and the unemployment insurance system to bring postsecondary education within the reach of greater numbers of working class Americans.

What the president proposes, however, is but a first step to address the nation’s need for a well-trained workforce and the needs of those who have entered the workforce but who require further education to get ahead. These “working learners” are now served by a system that is overly focused on crisis intervention at the point of unemployment and getting people back into jobs, and not focused sufficiently on the need for training and education.

Our nation’s existing postsecondary system is bifurcated, with no part adequately providing for the education of working learners. On the one hand are the tightly-structured, traditional college programs that serve the needs of full-time students who are ushered through the system toward completion of a college degree. This system, however, is ill-suited to workers who receive their education over longer periods during their work and family lives, and during occasional gaps in employment. On the other hand, there is a more flexible workforce development system, but it provides an unstructured hodge-podge of training that often fails to lead to a well-conceived career path and that produces little in the way of meaningful educational credentials for both the worker and the employer.

Change is clearly needed. The system’s hallmarks to bring the 75 million potential working learners the skills they and our economy need are:

- **Flexibility.** Very few working learners can take four years out of their lives to achieve a four-year college degree. Yet they can attend class as it fits in with the rest of their lives over longer periods of time. A system that provides for working learners must be flexible enough to accommodate this reality.
- **Credentials.** Many working learners who receive useful and relevant training fall short of receiving an actual degree or certificate. It often takes an extended period of time for working learners to achieve such a credential, leaving them with nothing to show for their educational achievements for many years. To provide a basis for employers

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to evaluate workers' skill levels—and working learners' evidence of their accomplishments—the system must offer credits and credentials for academic achievements short of traditional degrees.

- **Coaching.** For many working learners the career path is long and has many detours. They do not necessarily have a good sense of the opportunities available or the training needed to take advantage of those opportunities. Professional services with career coaches who are well versed in the staffing needs of employers, the skills required to fill those positions and the educational opportunities available are necessary intermediaries in the labor market.
- **Resources.** The existing workforce development resources are inadequate to provide education to working learners, most of whom have limited capacity to pay their own way and many of whom have financial obligations to their families.

To address these needs, changes are needed in our postsecondary education system and our workforce development system. Specifically, we need to:

- **Create a new Micro-Pell Grant.** The Pell Grant program is not currently designed well to get resources to those who want to take one course per semester or an occupational certificate. This inflexibility makes the program effectively less accessible for many working learners.¹ The Higher Education Act should be modified to create a special Pell Grant without this restriction funded with an additional \$2 billion available from other changes in the program.
- **Invest in community colleges.** Community colleges have strong academic standards and are in the business of offering credentials and credit for academic achievement. They are in a strong position within their communities to play a leadership role in meeting workforce needs of employers and the educational needs of working learners. They need to modify their programs to provide the greater flexibility these students require. To do this, however, will, it will require greater funding and incentives—some of which can be available through provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Access and Completion Incentive Fund.
- **Modify workforce development programs.** Congress needs to modify Title I and II of the Workforce Investment Act to:
 - Align several funding streams under WIA to ensure that education does not take a back seat to crisis intervention and that the system is structured to best serve the common needs of all working learners instead of being splintered into several, separate, inadequate programs.

- Enhance the U.S. Employment Service and place it in charge of the existing WIA One Stop System to run it as a continuous service career coaching center.
 - Set national postsecondary education goals for working learners that include less-than-college credit benchmarks for progress.
 - Convert the local Workforce Investment Board network under WIA into a quality assurance overseer to ensure that the partners in the new system—the providers of education, training and coaching—adequately serve the needs of both the employer and worker communities.
- **Create a new Office of Community College Innovation.** This office would be a partnership between the Offices of Adult and Vocational Education and Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education and the Employment and Training Administration at the U.S. Department of Labor.

Helping millions of American participate in education and training that yields a postsecondary credential is crucial for both America’s economic competitiveness and a stable, growing middle class. This paper presents ways to build upon President Obama’s Pell Grant and unemployment insurance proposals so that government programs and services help “working learners” combine employment and education over their working lives so they may advance through successful careers, however circumstances in the economy may change, and contribute to our national economic success.

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