



Strong Students, Strong Workers

Models for Student Success through Workforce Development and
Community College Partnerships

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Introduction and executive summary

The importance of community college to the education and vocational training of our nation's low-income youth and working adults cannot be overstated. More than 6.2 million students attended 1,045 community colleges in the United States in 2006, the most recent year for which federal statistics are available, and today represent about 35 percent of all postsecondary education students.¹ These institutions have a range of educational offerings, from two-year degrees to nondegree and vocational programs focused on a wide range of subjects, to match the increasing diversity of their students. Many of these programs can provide the postsecondary credentials needed by low-income youth and working adults to increase their labor market earnings, and the overall skills needed to keep the American workforce productive and competitive.

The Obama administration recognizes the potential of community colleges for these groups and for others, such as the workers displaced during the current economic downturn from their earlier jobs. The administration in July 2009 proposed a major new initiative that would provide significant new funding to states and community colleges to support innovations in these areas.

Yet there are some critical problems that now limit the extent to which the potential positive effects of community college in these areas can be realized. For one thing, despite considerable improvement over the past decade, low-income youth and adults still have relatively limited community college enrollments, and often fail to complete a degree or certificate once they enroll. A range of barriers still limits their ability to successfully attend these institutions and to complete courses of study there.

Furthermore, the classes and programs in which they enroll are often disconnected from areas of strong labor market demand where their earnings potential are most likely to be improved. In particular, community colleges are frequently disconnected from state and local workforce development systems, whose One-Stop Career Centers and personnel provide the employment services and training intended to help workers find jobs or improve their skills and earnings. Without better linkages across these two sets of institutions, students at community colleges do not necessarily take the classes and earn the credentials that will best serve them in the job market.

How can these problems be remedied? And what are states and local community college systems doing now to deal with these problems? In this paper, we address these issues. We begin by reviewing both the promise of community colleges as a source of skill development for low-income students, as well as the problems that currently limit their success with this population. We then review a wide range of efforts by community colleges and states, with funding from private foundations as well as the federal government, to improve enrollments and completion rates among disadvantaged youth and adults. These efforts include:

- **Systemic reforms** at the state level, including regulatory changes, legislative initiatives, and administrative modifications to better link community colleges and labor markets.
- **Instructional, curricular, and program reforms** at community colleges to provide skills remediation, labor market preparation and support services to low-income students.
- **Efforts aimed at disadvantaged youth**, including those still in high school as well as dropouts, to better connect them to community college and labor market opportunities.

In the vast majority of cases, these innovations have yet to be evaluated with any real level of rigor. Among the more promising to consider are:

- **Bridge programs and career pathways** that specify steps through which individuals' progress for upward career mobility, from remedial education to certificates academic degrees.
- **Alternative training and education, such as modular courses and stackable credentials** that allow open-entry and exit to and from programs and policies that allow time and course flexibility for adult students.
- **Integrated education, occupational and vocational training** rather than separate and disconnected strategies.
- **Sectoral training** to prepare workers and future workers for high demand occupations in growth industries.
- **Incorporation of supports and assistance** specifically designed to guide low-income students.

Thus, these efforts remain “promising,” but not yet “proven,” in most cases. Still, we provide evaluation evidence on the cost-effectiveness of these efforts whenever such evidence exists, and try to infer policy options that promote adoption of promise approaches. Specifically:

- State legislation can directly increase the attention and priority placed on integrated education and workforce development programs and policies. Legislative action in states such as Ohio and Arkansas called for new directions in programming statewide that requires integrating workforce development, college, and adult education programming.
- Administrative actions at the state level can also serve as major policy catalysts to require or encourage integrated programming. The well-known I-BEST model in Washington State that integrates adult education and occupational training began in a few community colleges as a state initiative and is now in all community colleges and the model is being continuously enhanced.

- State administrative structures can also link community colleges and workforce development more closely. In Oregon, they are organizationally integrated into the Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development.
- The availability of federal grant funding to develop training programs that consciously involve collaborations among workforce development agencies, community colleges and, in some places, economic development can prove to be essential additional resources to encourage communities to adopt innovative approaches.

In the pages that follow, we will explore our findings in greater detail and then close with some implications of this review for federal and state policy in the areas of higher education and workforce development. We will argue that Congress should:

- Fully fund the Obama administration’s proposed \$12 billion initiative on community colleges, and use it to encourage continued experimentation with and evaluation of local and state innovations that promote both greater academic and labor market success for the disadvantaged.
- Amend the Workforce Investment Act during reauthorization in 2010 to fund and incent training at community colleges, as well as from other providers, that is cost-effective and tied to well-paying “middle-skill” jobs in local areas.
- Amend the Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, and the Higher Education Act, or HEA, to improve access to and retention at community colleges for disadvantaged youth.

In addition:

- American Recovery and Reconstruction Act, or ARRA, and other funds should support research efforts to develop a better statistical inventory of the range of certificates and degrees now awarded by community colleges and other proprietary schools.
- States can and should do more to generate the kinds of systemic and instructional or curricular changes that we describe here, including better funding incentives for curricula that lead to certificate or degree completion in areas of strong labor market demand and stronger ties to local workforce development systems.

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