



# Community College 2.0

Louis Soares | May 2010

Community colleges have the potential to be an important engine of economic opportunity. Many working learners will begin their journey toward that critical postsecondary credential at a community college. And these are the only institutions whose missions encompass academic studies, vocational preparation, and developmental education while also offering college credits—the foundation for moving toward a postsecondary credential and a higher-skilled, better paying job.

Working learners have unique needs. They are often juggling work and education, many require remedial education, and some need help in adjusting to college culture and planning for future careers. And only 51 percent of students who enroll in community colleges with the intent to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution currently achieve their goal within six years.

Community colleges need to improve student success and help train our workforce for the future, but to do so they must move beyond traditional semester-length courses, develop bridges between for-credit and developmental and occupational education programs, and integrate career support into their everyday work. The federal government can help community colleges reach these goals through the Health Care and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act of 2010, passed in April, and the Obama administration's 2011 budget. These measures include new funding for the Departments of Education and Labor to direct toward community colleges, and they can and should use these funds to make investments to foster innovation in three key areas:

1. Faculty and staff professional development to help ensure that these school leaders are prepared to teach integrated developmental, occupational, and academic courses and provide career advising
2. Data systems that help community colleges better understand student learning and provide students with information to better plan their education
3. New associate's degree education models built on a foundation of apprenticeship and emerging educational models, called career pathways

These recommendations will accelerate community college transformation so these schools can better serve working learners and increase the number of their students who earn degrees.

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## Investments in faculty and staff

Working learners require developmental education that is sensitive to their real-life experience and applied work knowledge. They also need career guidance that helps them understand their skills and interests, college culture, and the transition to the workplace. But many community college faculty are part time and lack the training to meet these needs. And community colleges have few resources to invest in innovations that would prepare faculty to design curricula and new instructional approaches that help working learners achieve their educational goals.

New legislation in Congress can help address these issues. The Health Care and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act of 2010 includes funds that can be targeted to needed faculty and staff development in community colleges. The Community College and Career Training program, Sec. 1501 of the act, provides \$2 billion to the Labor Department to invest in community colleges between 2011 and 2014, and a \$750 million infusion into the Education Department's College Access Challenge Grant Program. Both programs will use matching grants to fund innovations to improve student success through partnerships between states, colleges, businesses, private foundation, unions, and other community stakeholders. The Departments of Labor and Education can invest the newly available funds in the following ways:

- The Labor Department should dedicate 10 percent of its Community College and Training Program funds to matching grants that support states and community colleges in developing sustainable models for professional development. This would include training faculty to integrate academic and occupational course work so that students can learn skills with labor market value while earning college credit.
- The Education Department should target 25 percent of College Access Challenge Grant funds to develop new models for career counseling in community colleges. Funds could be used, for example, to create sustainable partnerships to deliver career counseling services that link community college resources with those of employers, labor unions, public workforce development systems, and nonprofit organizations.

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## Investments in data systems

The cornerstone of the federal government's higher education policy has been a drive to increase access to higher education through Pell grants and subsidized student loans. This

is important, but it has led to a focus on the numbers of students enrolled without also tracking how many of those students graduate or receive a credential.

Data and finance systems in community colleges focus on numbers of students enrolled, rather than numbers who graduate. This makes it difficult for policymakers and students alike to determine the quality of an institution and whether they are getting an adequate return on investment (in the form of students who receive a credential and join the workforce). It also makes it difficult for faculty to assess and place students into remedial instruction, which is a contributing factor to some students' poor performance.

Community colleges need data systems that bring transparency to the instructional process and students' learning outcomes. Transparency will help faculty by providing them with a holistic profile of student academic preparedness and other factors that can help them create programs to better serve their students' needs and help them achieve an academic credential. Data about learning outcomes will also help students assess which courses and faculty will best help them achieve their educational goals. The Departments of Labor and Education can invest the newly available funds in the following ways:

- The Department of Labor should use 10 percent of community college and career training program funds to support the development of assessment tools and data systems at community colleges. This will help the colleges and the federal government better understand which instructional practices are most effective and improve developmental education.
- Faculty should use the data that are gathered in with these systems to help students learn. The data should also be made accessible to students so that they understand the quality of the education being delivered at the course level.
- These data systems can be linked to emergent state longitudinal data systems, the development of which is being funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This linkage will provide information about student success after completing educational programs and the overall performance of educational institutions.

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## Investments in new associate's degree education models

A community college's primary mission at one point in time was to prepare students to move on to further education, most likely to a four-year college to earn a bachelor's degree. But community colleges today have added occupational and developmental education to their mission. The traditional instructional model didn't evolve with the mission, and community colleges continue to use a semester-based approach based on the model of four-year colleges, which doesn't always meet the needs of students balancing work with studies.

There are well-established, emerging educational models for how to help working learners successfully complete postsecondary education and obtain credentials that will help them in the labor market, such as apprenticeship and career pathways—a series of connected education, training programs, and support services that enable individuals to secure employment within a specific industry or occupational sector. Community colleges participate in some of these initiatives but much more needs to be done for community colleges to meet the needs of today’s students and improve degree completion rates.

The president’s 2010 budget includes a \$321 million Workforce Innovation Fund, which redirects current budget dollars from the Department of Education and Labor into a co-managed, competitive grant program to support and test new ways to deliver workforce training programs that yield postsecondary credentials. These funds should be used to innovate the instructional programs at community colleges that lead to associate’s degrees, building on apprenticeship and career pathways models. The Departments of Education and Labor should use these funds to:

Invest 50 percent of the Workforce Innovation Fund in community college partnerships with business, unions, and nonprofit organizations that use apprenticeship and career pathways programs to help working learners complete associate’s degrees.

Encourage faculty innovation by creating a \$100,000 “Faculty Entrepreneurship Prize” for 10 faculty annually who have developed new approaches that redesign courses to integrate developmental, occupational, and academic education—especially innovations that create blended workplace and classroom-based programs that allow working learners to complete the credit requirements for an associate’s degree, such as apprenticeships and career pathways.

Create a Cross-Agency Credit Aggregation Research Project that would review the different tools and processes currently used to help students aggregate college credit from across their learning experiences including: paid work, volunteer activities, and courses taken at other education institutions. Working learners bring a wealth of experience with them to community colleges. Knowledge gained through experience and other educational institutions should be valued and allowed to count as credit toward attainment of a credential. Current systems that allow for students to aggregate credit such as state and institutional credit transfer policies, college credit given for occupational training, and prior learning assessment initiatives can be cumbersome, costing students time and money. The Departments of Education and Labor would conduct this research project and define a minimum, national level standard for credit aggregation that maintains educational quality but allows students to get credit for the knowledge they have acquired through previous life, work, and education experiences.

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## Conclusion

Community colleges stand at the crossroads of higher education and the real world, where working learners need to apply their knowledge and skills to add value in the workplace. Effective practices that integrate academic, occupational, and remedial education hold the promise of helping working learners develop the value-adding knowledge and skills that best prepare them to obtain good jobs with family sustaining wages and pursue the American Dream. The community college investments described above are solid first steps toward transforming educational practices that can help more Americans get ahead while keeping the economy competitive.

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