

# Workforce Strategy Report Promotes Better Use of Adult Ed

by Michelle Adam

**I**n August, the Workforce Strategy Center, a nonprofit management consulting firm, published a research report on how community colleges could form the backbone of workforce improvements.

As part of the report, researchers listed a number of community colleges that offered students what they called successful “career pathways.” What much of the research revealed, however, is that community colleges are underutilizing their ability to serve as an effective agent in preparing low-income and under-skilled populations for the workplace.

“What we found is that colleges have a huge array of remedial courses and quick-hit training on one end and high-end training on the other, but nothing bridging the two,” said Julian L. Alssid, director of the Workforce Strategy Center. “We saw fragmentation that paralyzes colleges from seeing their full potential. The biggest challenge is the division between the academic programming and the non-credit programming. The result is that millions of low-income people and workers are not being trained for work.”

The Center decided to look at ways in which career pathways—a clear path of education and support services established for disadvantaged adults to achieve economic self-sufficiency—could be most effectively created at community colleges. From past work with communities in New York and California, helping them establish links with businesses, community organizations, funding sources and other groups, Alssid has seen how community colleges are a key factor in this equation.

“Community colleges are always a part of the system. We all agree that they are the biggest infrastructure offering a route out of poverty for many people. There’s a lot to mine in there,” he said.

According to the report, “the nation’s 1,132 community colleges provide the most logical and, for all practical purposes, the **only** foundation for this kind of broad-based workforce development system. Colleges combine accessibility to the community low tuition, an open-door admissions policy, a wide range of education and training offerings, and a continuing funding base. No other institution can match the ability of community colleges to educate and train large numbers of people.”

Despite the gold mine that community colleges are, the potential of community colleges often goes overlooked, explained Alssid. Community colleges are often busy juggling multiple jobs, from offering technical programs and remedial programs to preparing students for transfer to four-year colleges. While doing so, they often get the short end of the stick when it comes to funding, and rarely form bridges between the many roles that community colleges play. Said Alssid, “Despite having multiple missions, there is often a lack of clarity.”

The results of this lack of clarity and cohesion are higher dropout rates and fewer numbers of disadvantaged students moving out of poverty into higher-skilled jobs. Alssid cited an example of this case at work.

“There is some research that shows that 50 percent of the students in remedial classes never get past the basic level. One study that I know of found out that 80 percent of adult basic education students were no longer enrolled in the college one year later. More often than not, they want more than a course. What it shows, and one thing

we know about community colleges, is that their developmental and adult-education programs often have high dropout rates and low graduation rates, and that in fact those colleges that are doing a good job of serving low-income populations are building bridges between those kinds of programs and the mainstream of their offerings. What we are saying is that people need to get some kind of postsecondary credentialing.”

While many adult students attend several classes at a community college in order to brush up on skills, learn computer programs, or improve their English, the report argues on behalf of showing these students the potentials that exist beyond the immediate skills that they are acquiring. Alssid argues that “most of these students want a better job and credentials,” but aren’t aware of the different career paths and options that they have.

An example of a career path put into effect through San Francisco’s Career Ladder System showed the following: An adult student takes a six-week class in computer training through the San Francisco Department of Human Services. The classes are offered at places such as the City College of San Francisco and the San Francisco Housing Authority. Upon completion of these courses, students are then offered suggestions on how they can take these skills and extend them into a larger career. A bridge already exists between this six-week course and programs through other foundations of community colleges in Web design or customer service-related work. Again, once students complete this entry-level training, they are shown programs that offer high-level training in different computer-related work. By the time students have completed coursework, and perhaps done so while working jobs and improving their skills, they have increased their potential salary from a minimum wage to more than \$30,000 a year.

The same kind of career pathways system can hold true for adult Hispanic students. Rather than merely teaching someone to speak English, “we suggest that the student learns English as it relates to some real stuff,” said Alssid. An example of teaching English in the context of a field or career strategy can be found at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, California.

During the past two years, Cabrillo College has helped connect low-income individuals with poor English skills with local jobs and career opportunities. The beneficiaries of many of the school’s efforts are Latinos who make up much of the agricultural workforce in the area.



Through its Career Ladders VESL Pilot project, and within a consortium of educational partners, students are taught work-related English language instruction. Prior to this pilot, virtually no work training was available to the most limited-English proficient.

Cabrillo College hosts other workforce programs as well, one such being the ACHIEVE program, which was launched in 1992-93 with grant monies and community donations. The focus of ACHIEVE is to integrate time management and office skills training with English instruction. Students are taught within a simulated office environment, and learn a variety of job skills, including preparing résumés, contacting employers, attending job fairs, and interviewing. The program has since enrolled 160 students and graduated 92 percent of them. The students have primarily been Latina women, ages 18 to 68, who are now working throughout Santa Cruz County. Some have been inspired to come back to Cabrillo College and further their education and careers.

Another Cabrillo program, the Health Careers Partnership, ensures that low-income and underrepresented populations have access to health careers. Through partnerships with local health-care employers, funds are provided to increase the scope of the nursing program, offering classes to employees and linking up with agencies to provide skills for the underrepresented.

The Maricopa Community College System in Phoenix, Ariz., has also been providing career pathways programs for low-income and underrepresented populations. The system is made up

of 10 colleges and two workforce skills centers. Of the colleges, Estrella Mountain Community College, Phoenix College, and South Mountain Community College are all Hispanic-Serving Institutions. The Southwest Skills Center is located at Estrella Mountain Community College and provides a large population of Hispanics with basic skills and pathways to careers.

“Once they get in the door, you see the confidence in their faces. They get excited about going to school,” said Adolfo Gamez, director of the Southwest Skills Center. “We treat them in such a way that they will all be successful.”

The Center offers a medical assistance program, a business, technology, and occupations program, a certified nursing program, C-Tech (skills in cable and fiber optics), and a licensed practical nurse program. They will soon be providing an associate’s degree in nursing, which will offer credit to students.

With all of their classes, the Center provides students with pathways to potential careers and facilitates the process of bringing education to low-income underrepresented students. In a way that is unusual for community colleges, it helps bridge their non-credit classes with credit classes at the colleges. For example, if a student takes the medical assistant program, a non-credit program, but then wishes to continue into a higher-level nursing program, that student is offered a certain number of credits upon transferring within the Maricopa Community College System.

Gamez described how their classes cater to all kinds of students. One group of students who



worked for a local company took classes in computers at the Center from 11 p.m. to 3:30 a.m. They were taught in both English and Spanish. “The old paradigm is gone,” said Gamez. “We have to meet the needs that are out there.”

Phoenix College, another of Maricopa’s colleges, provides a program called Bridges to Biomedical Careers that prepares and motivates minority students enrolled in associate’s degree biomedical programs to continue their education and earn a bachelor’s degree. Students receive an intensive five-week summer session in science-related topics. Upon completing this, they receive a stipend, upper-division credit toward a bachelor’s degree, and continued academic support throughout their education.

As a young college system with financial resources to pursue career pathway programs, Maricopa colleges are in an enviable position. One of the greatest challenges that many community colleges face in such circumstances is a lack of financial resources. According to the report, “The enhanced education called for in a pathways model is more expensive than traditional remedial programming, requiring additional resources for curriculum development, lab facilities, employer and student outreach, and faculty development.... Because most community college budgets are tied up in salaries for instruction, administrators have limited discretionary money and rely on grant funding to develop new programs or explore new ways of teaching.”

According to the report, other issues that inhibit colleges from forming pathways are the

conflicting and separate community college programs, college isolation from employers (or, if there is a connection, it is usually through a separate arm of the college), and a lack of incentive to serve the disadvantaged.

The report also highlighted ways in which everyone can benefit from career pathways. In creating stronger career tracks for disadvantaged students, community college administrators are able to expand recruitment and enrollment, increase visibility, and access new funding sources. Local workforce agencies then have a means of providing their clients access to an established training program and are able to leverage scarce resource workforce dollars with state education funding.

Also of note is that employers can find customized training for employees and meet labor market needs through the right community college programs for their potential or actual employees.

The report noted that in several states—Washington and North Carolina—initiatives stemming from the state level have provided the support for community college pathways systems. Through this process the states have been able to enhance the long-term earnings and economic self-sufficiency of low-income workers, help retrain workers, and create more competitive and local economies.

In 1998, the state of Washington expanded its welfare reform program to develop a skills-training initiative through community colleges to help low-income families move up the wage ladder. “From July 1998 through June 2002,

Washington invested approximately \$75 million in state TANF surplus funds to support the development of career pathways programs in community colleges,” cited the report. “After two years of this effort [of training programs], the community colleges have trained more than 1,500 welfare recipients and other low-income adults.”

North Carolina, too, invested its welfare dollars in creating career pathways through community colleges. In both cases, welfare recipients and low-income wage earners become more self-sufficient and are able to move out of poverty into higher skilled jobs.

The report concluded with numerous recommendations. It was suggested that community colleges build bridges between remedial and non-credit courses and the more traditional credit courses, create learning communities that bring together academic, vocational and contract faculty, seek and implement new federal and state grant opportunities, and develop links between the colleges and workforce and social services systems.

It was also recommended that community agencies reach out toward community colleges and funding sources, and for states to develop a career pathways vision and model for the state.

While career pathway initiatives are already in place throughout the country, as “pockets of pathways,” what Alssid wants to know is, “How can we move significant numbers of people?”

“What was most surprising to me,” he said, “was how few states and colleges have more than small boutique initiatives for creating pathways for disadvantaged folks. The issue is: to what degree are these partnerships serving disadvantaged people? So many Hispanics fall into this camp.”

*Building a Career Pathways System* is the first of three reports within this workforce strategy project. Already, however, Alssid has received a strong level of response—a sign that, despite a shortage in programs out there, an interest is growing.

“We’ve had a lot of phone calls. We’ve had a lot of interest in this,” said Alssid. “I think this paper is resonating with a lot of people and striking a chord.”

