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COMMUNITY COLLEGES SAID TO ADVANCE POOR

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TRAINING

Community colleges should be an integral part of work force training and development.

That is the central premise of a study that examines work force training programs across the country. The study by the Workforce Strategy Center in New York found a number of successful training programs have developed pathways for the working poor that take them from basic skills to on-the-job training to higher levels of education. What's more, the training process was planned and executed on the campuses of community colleges.

Funded by the James Irvine Foundation and the Ford Foundation, the researchers discovered that low-wage or unemployed workers who wish to advance in today's competitive job market must have some form of post-secondary education or training to become financially self-sufficient.

"Education has always been one way out of poverty for the unemployed and the working poor," according to the report, "Building A Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community-College Centered Workforce Development." "Today, education is almost the only way."

Information from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that as the level of education rises so does income. At the same time, unemployment levels decline. In 2001, the unemployment rate for workers 25 years and older with less than a high school diploma was 7.3 percent compared with 2.9 percent for those with an associate's degree and 3.5 percent for people with some college. Unemployment levels for those with bachelor's or master's degrees was 2.5 and 2.1 percent, respectively.

Median annual earnings for high school dropouts over the age of 25 was \$21,391 in 2000, according to federal data. By contrast, the median annual wage for workers with an associate's degree was \$35,389 that year versus \$32,400 for those with some college and \$46,276 for people with bachelor's degrees. The median salary for those with master's degrees was \$55,302.

The study points to community college programs in North Carolina, Texas, Washington state, and Illinois as successful work force training efforts that have helped low-wage workers find higher paying jobs by coordinating services with state agencies, employers, and neighborhood groups.

Although Massachusetts is mentioned only briefly in the study, employers at one Boston program are working with neighborhood groups, the city, and a university to prepare low-wage workers for jobs in health care. Bridges to the Future collaborates with a wide range of hospitals, community groups, and institutions, including Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, and the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corp. Participants receive English language instruction as well as basic training for entry level jobs. Once placed in a position, they are encouraged to continue their education. Employers provide tuition reimbursement, transportation to training sites, and classroom space.