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The Voice of Community Colleges



Building A Path Toward Higher Pay, Stable Jobs

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Community colleges shoulder a heavy responsibility for educating and training the bulk of America's workforce, with nearly half of all college students beginning their post-secondary education on their campuses. And while these schools offer the best vehicle for low-income students and others to gain access to the workforce, the training often falls short of that required to secure higher paying and more secure jobs.

A report released earlier this month by a nonprofit management counseling group examined the role of community colleges in preparing its students to compete in the workforce.

The report "Building a Career Pathways System," put out by the Workforce Strategy Center, recommended that community colleges restructure their programs to better integrate education, training and work experience.

"We found an incredible disconnect between departments," said Julian L. Alssid, director of the Workforce Strategy Center and co-author of the report. "Because for-credit college departments resist incorporating non-credit students into their programs, these students stay on a dead-end road. Around 80 percent of students in non-credit courses drop out within the first year, so there's a real churning effect."

The report stated a clear need to develop a large-scale, flexible and open system that offers education and training for all who need them: welfare recipients, unemployed workers, at-risk youth and anyone else who wants to better their job prospects but has few skills or little education.

To do this, however, the report suggested schools need to integrate departments currently focusing separately on education, workforce training and transition to four-year schools, so that all resources are available to all students. The workforce also needs to improve its connection to community colleges.

The key to this restructuring lies in developing pathways toward career progression, a system already in place in some areas of California, North Carolina, Texas and Washington State.

To overcome the barriers created by lack of resources and isolation from employers, the report suggests forming bridge programs to make remedial education more accessible to low-income adults seeking career training. This tactic reaches out to people already in the workforce, gives them

incentive to further their training; and helps them toward their ultimate goal of stable and higher paying employment.

“State policymakers don’t always value college education as a means to get people off welfare,” Alssid said, indicating there needs to be a change at the state level. He noted, however, that Washington state is one of a few exceptions to that rule.

The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges was awarded a one-year planning grant by the Ford Foundation for an initiative titled “Bridges to Opportunity.”

“This program’s goal is to articulate a system-wide vision of how community and technical colleges in Washington state can improve our delivery of services to help more low-income adults move into living-wage jobs,” said Kae Hutchison, project director for the grant.

“We’re looking for very practical solutions,” she added. “We will identify the policy barriers that might preclude us from achieving our vision and outline a plan to achieve our vision over the next several years.”

Each region within any community college’s reach should also dictate which training and degree programs are most relevant, the report stated. By targeting specific sectors of the workforce, students can fine-tune their education to make themselves most valuable as employees.

The report also calls for better cooperation among community colleges, adult-education providers, welfare and social services, and workforce agencies. “[These agencies] have always operated as separate entities with independent (although clearly overlapping) missions,” the report stated. “Community colleges and community-based organizations are ideally situated to work together to create branch campuses that marry community college instruction with neighborhood-based social services.”