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around the nation

around nation columns

Report: Colleges' Workforce-Training Programs Inadequate

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

NEW YORK — Although community colleges have come a long way in preparing workers for a rapidly evolving workplace, they are still not doing enough to put individuals on a path toward meaningful careers, a new report says.

Deficiencies in the system leave too many people wallowing in inadequate jobs, unprepared to advance beyond the lowest tiers of their chosen fields, according to "Building A Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development."

But, recognizing the colleges' potential for improvement, the group responsible for the report has outlined an ambitious agenda for building local and regional "career pathways" systems that rely on partnerships among educational and social agencies and businesses. Under the plan, community colleges would be in charge of organizing the efforts.

"There is a clear need — and opportunity — to develop a large-scale, flexible and open system that can offer the education and training required for high-wage, high-demand jobs to all who need them: welfare recipients, unemployed and underemployed workers, at-risk youth and anyone else with little skills or education who wants to better his or her job prospects," the report says. "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."

The report was produced by the Workforce Strategy Center, a New York-based nonprofit consulting firm that promotes programs for high-wage, high-demand jobs. The report, funded in part by The James Irvine Foundation and the Ford Foundation, is a follow-up to a study of evolving best practices in workforce development. Two more reports are expected in the future.

The document describes a seamless system of skills training, education, work experience and social support services that would allow low-level workers to go beyond basic employment and climb the career ladder toward better jobs.

A successful career pathways system, according to the report, provides an overview of career opportunities in the region, the basic skills to allow aspiring workers to succeed in education and training programs, internships and employment opportunities, ongoing training and social services.

“There are very practical steps colleges can take to better benefit disadvantaged populations,” said Julian Alssid, one of the report’s authors and a director of the center. “But we found at every level – institutional, regional, or state — this kind of fragmentation of programs that emanates from a multiplicity of missions.”

In most community colleges, for example, faculty and administrators responsible for training programs do not collaborate with their colleagues in the academic programs, Alssid said. But much research on workforce development points to the correlation between education and earnings and the benefits of ongoing and coordinated training and education.

Moreover, the structures of training programs — dividing them into credit and noncredit enterprises — often impede such an alliance. In most states, the authors write, the policies and practices governing community college systems may inhibit the development of a career progression strategy.

Funding limitations also could prevent states from undertaking effective, but more expensive approaches. Most states, for example, do not provide the same funding for students in workforce training and other noncredit courses that they do for those in academic programs.

But while colleges could increase their potential revenue by convincing policy makers to approve some training courses for academic credit, state procedures for establishing such policies, and a decided resistance among many academic faculty toward doing so, often stand in the way.

While some community college officials agree that the report’s suggestions would help colleges improve services to the working poor, implementing such a system may face challenges.

“The basic concept is linking several levels of service that are normally delivered in the college and thinking of them more as a progression and less as isolated programs,” said Dr. Kae R. Hutchison, a former administrator at Bellevue Community College in Bellevue, Wash. “The concept makes sense, and my experience is that they’re right — colleges don’t think of these things as a progression. But there are barriers buried in state policy or system policy that might get in the way.”

But just getting community college officials and policy makers to think more holistically, said Hutchison, who currently directs the state’s Ford Foundation Bridges to Opportunity Grant, would be a good first step.

Still, there are some promising models, and the report highlights some of them.

Washington State and North Carolina are recognized for their efforts in pursuing a career pathways approach.

Texas' Austin Community College has collaborated with a local foundation and the chamber of commerce to develop a construction trades program for those seeking such employment. The program has graduated more than 350 students and has placed more than 85 percent in jobs over the last four years.

And Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, Calif., has served hundreds of students through its "Ladders Project."

The report is available on the Internet at http://www.workforcestrategy.org/publications/Career_Pathways.p

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