

Workforce Development in the American Community College: A Practical and Pragmatic Response to Local and National Needs

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The American community college system has been successful in large part due to its outstanding ability to respond and adapt to the needs of the local communities it serves. The success of the two-year institution is reflected in the achievement of students, contributions to business and industry, and the ability to foster practical and pragmatic solutions to the problems faced by local jurisdictions and by the nation. No where is this more evident than in the community colleges' embrace of workforce development.

The growth of vocational education in America was in response to increased demands for specialized skills from the industrial sector. As the demand for specialized knowledge at the entry level expanded, the need for a postsecondary alternative to the four-year baccalaureate program became evident. Community colleges filled the void in postsecondary education by providing opportunities for technical education and career/occupational education, as well as adult and continuing education. In doing so, community college workforce development offerings responded to the specific needs of their communities for programs and the more general needs emerging from the increased demand for a trained labor force. As a result community college curricula were sensitive and responsive to the pressure created by rapid industrialization, technological innovation, and the need for practical, affordable and accessible post-secondary education. This emphasis on workforce development has helped to differentiate community colleges from other segments of higher education and it is predicted that this emphasis will gain greater importance in the decades to come:

“Community colleges are gradually emerging as the prototypical learning institutions for the new economy. They equip graduates with a mix of applied and academic learning that is increasingly necessary to sustain careers in modern economies, and they maintain a unique position among educational institutions as providers of both skill training and academic knowledge.” (Carnevale and Desrochers, 1997 p.29).

The History of Workforce Development in the Community College

Workforce development is, and has been, a critical component of the mission of the two-year institution. Vocational /career /occupational /terminal education programming has been championed by the American Association of Community Colleges since its inception, and today workforce development efforts are an integral part of the educational offerings of the vast majority of two-year institutions. This emphasis on workforce development was fairly predictable given the historical antecedents of the modern comprehensive community college. The community college had its roots in and was influenced by all other segments of education – the public schools, the private junior colleges and the four-year colleges and universities. Perhaps the earliest philosophical roots go back to Thomas Jefferson who in his letter to Dr. Price on January 8, 1789 said, " ... whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that, whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights." He is also attributed with saying that "Education should be practical as well as liberal and should serve the public good as well as individual needs." Those two sentiments not only influenced the first national "mass" education movement but also validated an individual's pursuit of a post-secondary educational experience beyond the traditional liberal arts.

Workforce Development in Today's Community College

While the American community colleges have for decades been the largest providers of vocational/occupational skills training, they also have more recently developed expertise and contribute to workforce development as trainers, partners in economic development activities and providers of contract and customized job training. Unfortunately, workforce development has come to be defined narrowly as "alternative" programs, separate from the core degree and certificate offerings. This narrow definition does a disservice to the comprehensiveness of the workforce development efforts of the community college. The two-year institution excels in adult and continuing education and remedial education for "soft-skill" development by providing entry-level skill development in reading, writing, math, computer literacy, and "soft skills" fostering responsibility in the workplace; providing customized job training for industry-wide needs or initiatives; developing two-year, associate-degree curricula for emerging long-term labor needs; developing curricula for short-term intensive courses and training in areas identified by local businesses and industry as critical to the economic viability of individual companies and/or the region as a whole; providing hands-on training in the use of computers, advanced manufacturing, and other state-of-the-art equipment and technologies in which today's

employees must be proficient; and establishing a real-world curricula and hands-on training experiences to students entering the workplace or upgrading their skills in preparation for new responsibilities. Each of these delivery systems is a sample of the types of responses that are made possible at the community college and that are required as the nation responds to its workforce development needs.

Today, the workforce development needs of the country demand an even greater level of response from the community college sector. Technicians are in high demand. Some postsecondary education or training is mandated for many entry level positions, and workers need continuous retraining and skill development in order to stay current or advance in most jobs. Commenting on the Workforce Investment Act, Rachel Gragg, Federal Policy Director for the Workforce Alliance stated,

“The total number of jobs requiring a post-secondary vocational award or associates degree is projected to grow 21 percent between 2004 and 2014, faster than the overall increase in projected employment for the same period. Of the 55 million job openings between 2004 and 2014 filled by workers new to their occupation, 15 million (more than one quarter) will be filled by workers who have some college, skill training, or an associate’s degree but do not have a bachelor’s degree.”

Until recently, a high school diploma was the minimum required for most good jobs; now some form of postsecondary education and training is the minimum. Aissid (2007) reports that, “As of 2006, nearly half of adults over the age of 26 – approximately 90 million Americans – had no more than a high school diploma or GED. Yet 65 percent of the country’s fastest growing occupations require postsecondary education.”

The most significant occupational gap in this country is in occupations that require more than a high school degree, but less than a four-year degree. Providing opportunities to attain the education required for those occupations is causing an ever-increasing number of students to turn to community colleges for their education and training needs.

As the nation is experiencing an increasing demand for skilled workers, a growing shortage of prepared workers, and increasing job demand for postsecondary education, it is clear that a continued emphasis on workforce development at the community college level will be necessary. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that employment in all seven employment categories that generally require a college degree or other post secondary award is projected to grow faster than the average across all occupations. In “Hitting Home: Quality, Cost and Access Challenges Confronting Higher Education Today,” Travis Reindl estimates that the United States needs to

educate an additional 15.6 million people with either bachelor or associate degrees by 2025. This trend translates to 781,000 degrees a year on top of current levels or a 37% increase nationally. As the need for skilled workers becomes increasingly evident to business and community leaders, individuals and their families are becoming better informed about the benefits of educational attainment.

Addressing the Needs of a Changing Workforce

Community colleges have traditionally served an eclectic population. For community colleges, the demand is not just from traditional-aged students, but also non-traditional students and incumbent workers seeking an upgrade of their skills or an opportunity to change professions/vocations. "The rapidity of innovation and the unpredictability of the directions it may take imply a considerable investment in human capital...Workers must be equipped not simply with technical know-how but also with the ability to create, analyze, and transform information and to interact effectively with others. Moreover, that learning will increasingly be a lifelong activity" (Greenspan 2000 p. 3). Incumbent workers are an often neglected but significant cohort in need of training and education. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that by 2010, more than 51 percent of the workforce is expected to be 40 or older, a 33 percent increase since 1980, while the portion of the workforce aged 25 to 39 will decline 5.7 percent. This means that a majority of the future workforce is already working. Reflecting on the role of community colleges in workforce development, Chairman Ben S. Bernanke noted that "Community colleges play a constructive role not only for 18-to-22 year-olds, but also for older adults, providing flexible programs for obtaining new skills, specialized training contracted for by individual businesses, remedial education, and adult enrichment" (Bernanke, 2007).

Given the changes in skill demands and the demographic shifts in the next decade, the need to increase the skills of the nation's workforce is more critical today than ever. Individuals, companies and communities benefit from increased community college workforce development efforts. Statistics demonstrate that individuals earning an Associate Degree (compared to a HS degree) earned more. According to the Census Bureau, over an adult's working life, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2 million; in contrast associate's degree holders earn about \$1.6 million. Companies benefit when they can meet their incumbent worker training needs and can depend upon a stream of educated emergent workers filling the need for skilled new employees. Communities benefit as they define their economic development efforts and attract new companies to their region. Clearly, the American community college fills a critical void in the post-secondary education and training sector.

The development of workforce curricula has been a critical component in the evolution of the American community college. A residual benefit of this trend has been the successful practice of forging partnerships between colleges and the private sector. It is important to recognize that one of the hallmarks of the community college has been the degree to which two-year institutions have been able to foster productive and effective partnerships in workforce development. Partnerships will continue to be an essential component of community college workforce development projects. Continued economic growth and development will require a qualified work force. New technologies will require that workers obtain new knowledge and skills. Technological changes will require updating workers' existing knowledge and skills to avoid their obsolescence. Partnerships with business and industry, economic development agencies, federal, state and local governments, private providers, the public k-12 system and the universities have enhanced the workforce development efforts of the community college. In addition, as a result of the partnerships developed, the colleges have been the beneficiaries of an increased amount of private support. Partnerships have fostered a unified and cost effective delivery system for workforce education in the nation.

Workforce Development Delivery Systems

Having examined the historical origins of workforce development as a curricular concern and recent demographic and workforce trends that have led to increased partnering between community colleges and other sectors, it would be useful to examine in greater depth some of the workforce delivery systems currently utilized. As noted earlier, workforce development is often too narrowly defined as "alternative" programming. In many respects, this is an artificial divide between the workforce programs and the broader credit, degree and certificate courses offered at the community college.

The transfer function of the community college is not often listed as a workforce development activity, but it should be noted that enrollment in a transfer program is a first step for many students who desire employment requiring a baccalaureate degree. Anthony Carnevale (2000) wrote,

"Because community colleges are affordable, welcoming, and community-based, they are critical vehicles for getting 18- to 24-year-old students started and keeping them on the higher education highway. Currently, about 30 percent of community college students transfer to four-year schools in order to take advantage of the expanding career options that go with a four-year degree. Successful transitions from two- to four-year institutions will become all the more

important as the minimum education qualification for good jobs and elite jobs continues to go up.” (p.2)

It should also be noted that for many students, beginning their post-secondary work at the community college has the added advantage of providing them with smaller class sizes, faculty dedicated primarily to teaching, and lower cost. More importantly, Clifford Adelman (2005) found that traditional-age community college students who transfer to four-year institutions often do as well academically as those who started out there. It is becoming increasingly clear that, with the increasing level of skills required for all jobs, many students use the transfer associate degree as the first step in preparing for a job.

Along with transfer options, the community college offers traditional occupational degrees. Occupations experiencing skills gaps include construction workers, manufacturing, laboratory technicians, auto mechanics, nurses and allied health workers – all samples of programs typically offered at the community college as associate degree programs. In fact, “Well over a half-million associate degrees are awarded by community colleges annually, one-third of them for liberal arts or general studies. Most recipients intend to matriculate at senior institutions. The remainder go to students in occupational fields, one-fourth of them in the health professions -- nursing, dental assistance, medical lab technician training and related fields. Business professions -- including secretarial services, business administration, accounting and small-business management -- account for an additional 25 percent of the associate degree awards.” (Cohen, 2002). These terminal programs provide the workforce with the “technicians” so desperately needed in the workplace. The technician has become the standard bearer in a number of fields. These technical workers need the practical skill required of their job and the ability to identify and solve problems, work well with others and understand the application of technology. Modern technicians need not only to work well with their hands, but to think and apply their knowledge to a broad range of problems in the workplace.

Performing the work required by technicians in today’s workforce increasingly requires an associate degree.

“The education qualification also has gone up for good jobs, such as those held by crafts workers, technicians, and clerical workers. In 1959, 57 percent of men and 30 percent of women in these jobs were high school dropouts. By 1997, only 11 percent of the men and 5 percent of the women who held these jobs were dropouts. Similarly, in 1959, only 14 percent of the men and 19 percent of the women who

held these jobs had associate degrees or some college. In 1997, more than half of the workers who held good jobs had associate degrees or at least some college" (Carnevale, 2000. P.5).

Certificate programs are also terminal education and often last less than two years. These certificate options are based on either a designated course sequence or a set of competencies and/or outcomes in those certificates designed to meet occupational standards in a short-term program. National skills standards or competencies, identified cooperatively with business and industry, typically provide the source for curricular offerings in a certificate program. Industry standards typically define the skill requirements in credentialing programs. The vast majority of the more than 165,000 advanced certificates community colleges award are in job-related fields. Short-term programs offering certificate training include areas such as repair, transportation, computer and information science, and critical crafts.

The American community college has also developed workforce programs in the following ways: partnerships with local unions in apprenticeship programs, a variety of continuing education offerings provided on-site or at the college, assistance to business in identifying skill requirements of job classifications, short-term entry-level skill development programs, contracted training for business, adult education programs giving individuals the basic skills to enter job-training programs, and a number of other credit and non-credit offerings to enhance workforce development.

In addition to the workforce development activities listed, it should also be noted that the community colleges in many jurisdictions are seen as important partners in the economic development activities in their region. Community college staff members help to attract new business to the area by meeting with potential employers to provide information about educational opportunities for employees and to provide information on their capacity to develop programming to train a local workforce for employment.

Conclusions

While workforce development programs have been an historical part of the community college mission, they have never been as important to the nation as they are today. In December 2001, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development David Sampson clearly and concisely articulated what is at stake.

"Unless the skills gap within the United States is closed and employers can find the workers they need, and job seekers have the skills to pursue the opportunities that will exist, then America's economy will remain extremely vulnerable.... The stakes are high: freedom of trade and

commerce; personal and political liberty; and national and individual security.” (p.6-10)

The challenge to community colleges has been to produce the workforce that will meet the needs of businesses and to provide the skills and education to individuals that prepare them for entering or advancing in the workplace. The National Governors Association in the 2002 *A Governors Guide to Creating a 21st Century Workforce* stated,

“Our businesses need skilled workers to continue producing goods and services marked by innovation, knowledge and quality – characteristics that give U.S. firms a competitive edge in the global marketplace. If we are to sustain this advantage, we must build a workforce enterprise that:

- improves the productivity and competitiveness of all workers and employers;
- builds the skills needed for quality jobs;
- provides lifelong learning opportunities;
- supports workers in managing their careers; and
- is supported by public and private investment.” (p.6)

The American community college has been an integral part of a workforce system that does just that. Workforce development has and will continue to be a critical and necessary part of the community colleges’ response to the needs of the nation. However, workforce development should not be narrowly defined as those programs that are “alternatives” to the more traditional degree and certificate offerings of the two-year institution. Today’s workforce and employment needs require a more comprehensive definition of workforce development that encompasses all of the relevant offerings of the community college.

For instance, at Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno, Nevada, a full array of workforce programs have been required to meet the workforce development needs of the region. New associate degree programs were developed in areas like manufacturing when local employers defined this as a growth area for the region. New short-term and certificate programs were developed to meet the needs in the construction industry for critical craft workers. Over a dozen apprenticeship programs were operated in conjunction with local unions. Continuing education courses in areas like “workplace literacy,” “Spanish for the workplace,” and “Spanish for Supervisors” were conducted. Tech-prep and articulated programs have been developed with the high schools in the region and articulated programs with the university have been initiated. Partnerships with the local workforce development agencies and economic development agencies have also been forged. All of those programs are part of an integrated workforce

development initiative. Workforce programs cannot be an “alternative” track for students. These offerings provide workers and employers with the requisite programs to address the post-secondary needs for education and training below the baccalaureate level and assist in meeting the employment and training needs of the region.

Community college programs will continue to provide a practical and pragmatic response to local and national workforce development needs.

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