

The Community College as a Nexus for Workforce Transitions: A Critical Essay

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Community colleges traditionally have been a nexus for transitions to and from the workforce. This article examines horizontal and vertical workforce transitions and how a global economy and the need to train new subpopulations of future workers will cause community colleges to approach their roles in workforce training differently. There are too little hard data at present to guide either practice or policy for new realities. The authors recommend that community colleges address these critical information shortages by documenting both the inputs and outcomes of programs and activities that facilitate horizontal and vertical workforce transitions.

Introduction

Community colleges have made significant contributions to preparing America's workforce. Their broad arrays of low-cost programs and flexibility in providing instruction are their hallmarks. Occupational-related programs at community colleges produce income gains for students (Silverberg, Warner, Fong & Goodwin, 2002). At the same time, employers benefit from having access to a trained workforce. Recent research indicates that the image of community colleges as the "gatekeepers of educational opportunity" is embedded in mass American public opinion (Gould & Associates, 2004). In recognition of its promise, the federal government recently has allotted \$250 million for community colleges to provide training in high performance occupations.

Signs are also that community colleges will have an even greater role in preparing the future workforce. Occupations requiring a vocational

postsecondary award or an Associate's degree accounted for 29 percent of all jobs in 2000. These occupations will account for 42 percent of total job growth by 2010 (Hecker, 2001). Other reports suggest that more than 80 percent of new jobs created over the next two decades will require some postsecondary education short of a 4-year degree (for example see, Hecker, 2005).

On the surface, community colleges look to a bright future. Yet, serious challenges loom. Despite their track record of enrolling students in career and technical programs, assisting them to find employment, making connections with prospective employers, and basking in the glow of public trust, obstacles they can control and those they cannot will cause community colleges to approach workforce development much differently in the immediate future. In this article we focus on one such challenge, the community college's role in facilitating transitions to and from the workforce within a changing economy. We

provide an overview of the challenges ahead and how those challenges will either hinder or help community colleges to continue their traditional role as a nexus for workforce preparation. A central thesis to this article is our belief that too few data currently are available that can inform how community colleges promote and facilitate workforce transitions to illuminate either successful practice at individual community colleges or the development of more effective national policy.

The need to create and document seamless transitions for students is the foremost challenge for community colleges in this area. Positioned as a nexus for workforce training and college-level education, these colleges seem ideally situated as the vehicle for grappling with workforce transitions. The environment in which the community college functions is hybrid and, when it functions well, involves a range of partners from employers to local workforce boards to other institutions of higher education. However, it is debatable whether the current range of training programs is helping individuals manage transitions within their current work situations, or is helping them

to find different employment. There is much to be learned.

Figure 1 depicts the central role that community colleges play in workforce transitions. Paralleling a theme that runs throughout this issue, previous research in this area has focused almost exclusively on vertical transitions, e.g., the upward movement of students from secondary schools or to the community college to initial employment. Less attention has been paid to horizontal transitions, namely those transitions from employment or unemployment to the community college, including transitions made by those individuals who are simultaneously students and employees.

Vertical Workforce Transitions

To an extent that is not typically found in other sectors of higher education, community colleges have a history of tracking the placement and salaries of vocational education completers. The impetus for this practice may be found in a succession of federal pro-

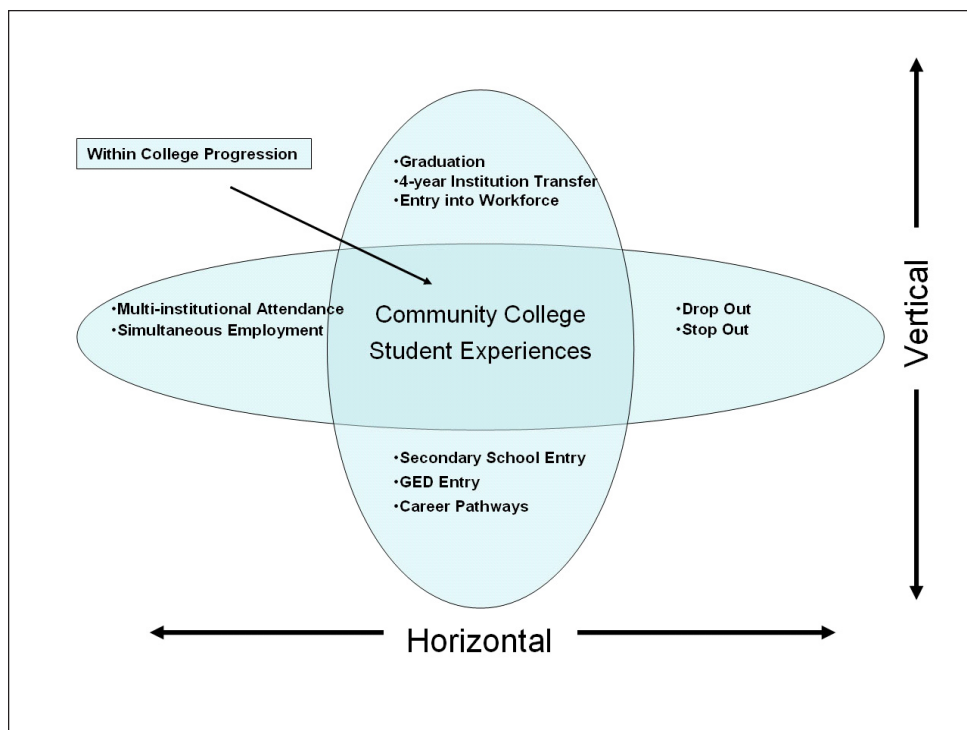


Figure 1. Horizontal and Vertical Transitions

grams such as the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 (known as Perkins III) (for more information, see www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/reauth/perkins.html) and more recently the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) (for more information, see www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/wia/act.cfm). Because of their participation in these programs, most community colleges can report whether career and technical graduates have been placed in the specific fields for which they trained. More recently, community colleges have also been required to report attainment of skills in response to more recent demands of Perkins III and WIA legislation.

It is fair to say that much more is known about student experiences at the upper end of the vertical workforce continuum at community colleges, and to a lesser degree at the middle of that continuum, than is known about the lower end, or the entry point. With the possible exception of the data that is collected by community colleges under Perkins III for Tech Prep students who start in secondary schools and ostensibly finish their programs at the community college, there has been little play in the literature about the bottom of this continuum. In this same volume, however, Deborah Bragg offers a glimpse of the hard data outcomes that are associated with a range of these programs, a badly needed contribution to our collective knowledge about vertical transitions from the secondary school sector. While that area of the literature is now improving, ~~however~~, we still know little about individuals who enter the community college from outside formal education networks. We now understand a considerable amount about the top of this continuum and less about its inputs.

Horizontal Workforce Transitions

For discussion, we define horizontal workforce transitions as those transitions other than those that start at one level of education (such as secondary education) and pass through other levels of education (such as community colleges) and end ultimately with a first job. Horizontal transitions incorporate non-linear behaviors such as entering the community college after a hiatus from secondary school or other formal education. Horizontal transitions also occur

when one enters the community college from employment or unemployment and, accordingly they can, and should, occur even after one has progressed through successful vertical transitions on the way to a degree or other formal award. In the context of retraining and continuous acquisition of skills needed for successful employment, it is critical that community colleges make further progress in promoting horizontal transitions.

Most of these horizontal experiences will fall outside the “normal” pathways associated with degree progression. In fact, they may have little to do with a given student’s desire to obtain formal recognition. Most tracking systems, however, have been established to measure linear behavior; they do little to measure the episodic interactions with the community college that mark horizontal transitions. The result is that we know far too little about what types of support community colleges might provide to individuals who must manage the difficult transitions that are brought about, for example, by changes in technology and structural change in the economy.

These transitions assume even more importance at the community college where more than half of all students work more than 20 hours a week (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2005). In addition to simultaneous employment during attendance, other transitions may include transitions that individuals make from the workforce to community colleges and from community colleges to the workforce without completion of a degree or certificate. A given employee, for example, may interact with a community college many times throughout her or his career, creating multiple points of transitions that may or may not result in a degree or certificate. At the other end of the continuum, a given employee may only participate in one non-credit training session or for-credit class in the course of her or his employment.

WIA can help in understanding horizontal transitions since it also requires colleges to calculate completion rates of students referred to community colleges through local One-Stop centers. Sadly, the data generated from these mandates that might provide a better picture of vertical transitions is seldom aggregated and analyzed beyond the routine reports to funding agencies. Even scarcer, perhaps because they are not subject to governmental accountability

oversight, is information about the success of other horizontal transitions such as career pathway programs that seek to prepare low-income people for sustainable employment. Simply, we have no hard evidence beyond that collected by isolated community colleges that can guide future work aimed at improving the competitiveness of the hardest to serve.

The very permeability between work and community college attendance that community colleges routinely celebrate is not linked to mechanisms that can capture the full range of workforce transitions. Unlike the linear progression associated with degree or certificate completion that are signaled with clear marker events like graduation from the community college, few events associated with horizontal transitions can be captured without linking data systems inside higher education with those data systems outside of higher education, including, for example, state unemployment insurance files and specific employment databases, such as teacher credentialing, that are, for the most part, more difficult for individual researchers or single institutions to access.

Emerging Realities Challenge the Study of Workforce Transitions

Having sketched the nature of workforce transitions, we now discuss broadly the challenges that community colleges face in promoting and facilitating these transitions. Where appropriate we also note where specific actions by community colleges might serve to broaden practice and national policy. Foremost among those challenges is *the changing nature of work and predicted scarcity of workers in the United States*. Most of the new jobs that will be created in the United States are in the service sector, and many will pay a relatively low wage. Of the 1.5 million jobs added to the national economy from 1992 to 2000, more than one-third were in the top quintile, and 20 percent were in the bottom quintile. Only six percent were at the middle quintile. This pattern has not shown signs of improvement. From 2000 to 2003, the national economy lost 825,000 jobs overall, while 540,300 jobs were added to the lowest quintiles (Atkinson, 2005). At the same time, two Bureau of Labor Statistics reports (Hecker, 2001; Toossi, 2002)

point to an impending labor shortage in the year 2010 when there will be 167.8 million available jobs in the U.S. economy but only 157.7 million workers to fill them. A prevailing service economy in which workers are scarce coupled with the continued outsourcing of many jobs offshore begs for a coordinated national response. While community colleges cannot control historical birthrates, including the number of Baby Boomers whose retirements are the underlying reasons for the looming labor shortage, they can do more to emphasize skill-based programs that can prepare more knowledge workers (for example see, Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001).

A second challenge is found in *accelerated competition for available students*. Options in distance learning, Internet courses and expanding private sector training make it possible for individuals to access credit instruction without coming to the community college. Such activity is widespread (for example see, Adelman 2000), but almost nothing is known about the characteristics of the learners who pursue these options, mitigating the opportunity for community colleges to match the needs of this emerging market with the learning opportunities they can provide. Learning from the success of the community colleges, many public and private four-year institutions have begun offer programs to the same firms and successfully compete on price and quality with the community colleges (for example see, Meister, 1998; Bailey, Badway & Gumport, 2001).

The appetite among adults for formal learning opportunities is expanding (Voorhees & Lingenfelter, 2003), but this demand does not automatically lead adults to community colleges. Smaller for-profit trade schools aimed at working adults have enjoyed recent growth under the present Administration because of their improved access to student financial aid and increased immunity from oversight by accreditation agencies. As a result many of these schools have increased their enrollments, particularly trade schools that are directed at frontline service and technology jobs, by taking advantage of the accessibility to student loan programs to underwrite their operations. They advertise and market widely among low-income people who believe they could never attend college (Hechinger, 2005). Unlike most community colleges, private institutions focus on specialized credit pro-

grams for their students and not on a broad range of programs. They also have been found to be particularly good at helping minority students earn technical degrees (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Bailey, Jacobs, Jenkins & Leinbach, 2003). In our experience, few community colleges understand their competition in ways that enable them to engineer programs and opportunities that can result in increased enrollments via horizontal workforce transitions.

Shifts in the focus of corporate training have accompanied radical changes in American businesses, including the movement of operations off shore. The use of community colleges for training and education is now either on hold or in decline in many industries. Coupled with this is an increasing tendency of companies to shift their training activities away from front line workers and white collar and technical training (Carnevale & Fry, 2001). The large customized training programs of the 1990s occurred mainly in manufacturing facilities in industries such as auto, steel and aerospace which were “modernizing” in the face of international competition. Many of these firms have now either closed their United States operations or have embarked on recruiting programs that seek workers with previous education (Jacobs, 2001). Stemming the departure of those manufacturing jobs that require a restricted worker skill set probably is not a realistic agenda for most community colleges. Instead, partnerships with knowledge-based employers and those in advanced manufacturing applications, e.g., those that embed new technologies in production, is an imperative.

A fourth challenge is *the perceptions of college educated workers, or workers with some college, who are less likely to view the community colleges as a practical source for technical training.* Given a choice, these employees are typically more comfortable with seeking to revitalize their workplace skills at 4-year private institutions.

A fifth challenge is *the current preoccupation with degree and certificate completion rates attendant to vertical transition accountability efforts* which are not among the best measures of the success of workforce education programs. We are not dismissing the value of a formal award from a community college to students or employers. However, we also believe that community colleges them-

selves could do more to promote the value of program completion. Career and technical programs, for example, often do not emphasize completion of credentials as a necessary prerequisite for job entry. Employers also do not always wait for students to finish their programs before offering full-time employment, in effect “eating their young”. Ultimately, the phenomenon of students departing programs prior to completion may also be indicative of a mismatch between program curricula or its length and what is required for successful employment.

A sixth challenge occurs at the most neglected level of educational opportunity, *workforce transitions directed at low-income individuals.* Included here are programs for the chronically underemployed. Under WIA such training tends to be very short term and concentrated most often upon finding work quickly. Indeed, the actual numbers of individuals trained under the WIA programs has declined precipitously. WIA was initially funded at almost \$5 billion in 1998. Funding fell to \$3.5 billion by 2001, and the impact is understated since many states constructed new One Stop centers, and/or invested in new labor marker systems rather than workforce training during the intervening time. As a result, by 2001 the number of individuals trained under WIA decreased to 72,322 from 168,223 in 1998. (Spence & Kiel, 2003).

It is ironic that fewer adults participate in WIA programs at a time when the national focus rightfully appears to be shifting to the supply of workers who are most likely to originate among subpopulations that heretofore have not participated in higher education at rates commensurate with their share in the total population. Included here are individuals from inner city neighborhoods, new American immigrants, and those displaced out of the traditional middle class jobs because their jobs in the manufacturing sector have been eliminated. As the need to serve these populations increases, some colleges are taking a different approach, linking adult basic education not just to GED or ESL programs, but to the programs that motivate low-wage workers to attend community college in the first place. Obviously, the imperative to make these transitions successful are among the most difficult challenges faced by community colleges.

Best practice in this area indicates that credit

and non-credit programs should be more closely linked so that adults can move seamlessly into college (Perrin, 2006). Many disadvantaged students cannot enter select occupational classes before they improve their basic education skills. This is usually accomplished through the non-credit courses, but these compensatory courses must clearly lead to credit classes. Second, the curriculum should be contextual and relate directly to specific occupational fields. These are individuals who need jobs and their initial interest in college is primarily because they believe it can get them a better spot within the labor market. Third, support services should not automatically stop at a specific literacy level, but instead they should focus on helping students enter degree programs. In this light, adult basic education is not an end to itself but becomes a feeder system for the occupational programs of the community college. There are enormous advantages to this approach because it identifies a specific constituency that may be a new market for many of the present entry level programs of the community college workforce development. It also continues one of the important missions of the community college, the need to serve the individuals who have little or no relationship to a college education.

The attention now paid to bettering the prospects for low skilled, low income workers have been enthusiastically welcomed by many American foundations that have funded projects such as Achieving the Dream (www.achievingthedream.org) that attempt to get selected colleges to improve the completion rates of low-income students. Yet, outside of those few pilot projects that receive external funding, such work has not received matching support from existing community college leadership. Such lack of advocacy may be predictable given the great amount of resources required to serve hard to serve students amid significant state cutbacks for higher education in general. At the same time, however, case studies exist in the literature of community colleges that have reached out with programs to serve low-income populations with innovations such as career pathways (for example see, Alssid, Gruber, Jenkins, Mazzeo, Roberts & Stanback-Stroud, 2005; Liebowitz & Taylor, 2004).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Inarguably, community colleges are indispensable to the nation's economic health. Because of their commitment to serving communities and learners, the community college will always serve as a nexus for workforce transitions. The question is not whether they will continue in this role, but how well they will perform. In this article we suggest that community colleges need to understand and document key areas of workforce transitions in ways that can aid their own practice and can promote effective policy.

It is not just the preparation of knowledge workers that should occupy community colleges. Certainly, there is an element of glamour in training students in the latest technologies and with the latest pedagogy. At the same time, however, there are indications that the United States soon will have difficulty in sustaining its *total* labor force. This fact appears not to have occupied much of the public's attention at this writing, but community colleges need to lead the way in training knowledge workers while simultaneously reaching out to those outside formal education networks to prepare them for successful workforce entry. This calls for nimbleness and a commitment to create and document workforce transitions in ways that can guide future practice as well as national policy.

What is needed at this juncture is an increasing awareness of transitions —horizontal transitions in particular— and more understanding of the experiences of those making those transitions. Improvements in practice and national policy should be based on hard data. A dearth of hard data that pertain to workforce transitions prevents colleges and policymakers alike from approaching consistent decisions about what next steps are needed to facilitate student transitions. Readers will note that the lack of data outcomes about workforce transitions in this article was not because they were plentiful. Indeed, we were unable to uncover comprehensive sources of data about horizontal transitions. We simply have too little hard data about the participation of low-income students at the bottom end of vertical transitions to be able to accurately isolate the very best practices that promote their eventual success. Similarly, were community colleges able to accurately

predict the demand for horizontal workforce transitions, they may be able to influence that demand by the provision of new programs and learning opportunities more closely matched to the needs of prospective students and their employers.

We began this article by stating that the future looks bright for community colleges as a nexus for workforce preparation and we are not dissuaded in this position. We believe, however, that additional effort is needed to help institutions, researchers, and policymakers to understand the breadth of workforce transitions and the critical roles they play in that arena.

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