

From Best Practices to Large Scale Change

Address to the League for Innovation in the Community College

By Hilary Pennington

Community colleges have many missions: academic education and transfer to four-year colleges, remediation, occupational education, workforce and economic development, and personal enrichment. In March 2002, in a keynote address to the League for Innovation in the Community College, JFF CEO Hilary Pennington focused on their role as a bridge across the digital job divide.

Among the complex roles and missions of the community college in our society, I want to focus on one today: their role as a bridge across the digital job divide in America—that is, their role in providing pathways to help low-income youth and adults advance from dead-end jobs to careers in today's knowledge-based economy. And let me start by telling you my key points:

- First, providing pathways to advancement is one of the most important challenges that our country faces.
- Second, community colleges are already pursuing a range of innovations and approaches in addressing this critical need.
- Third, the community colleges that do this task most effectively are those that can link all parts of the institution—the credit side, the non-credit side, student support services, and others—into a coherent system, a seamless set of pathways that act as a magnet for advancement for students, *regardless of when and where and how they come into the college.*
- Next, doing this is not easy: a host of institutional practices, public policies, and other challenges stand in the way.
- Finally, this moment is an opportunity for leadership in beginning to overcome some of those challenges, in marshalling greater attention at the state and federal levels, and in involving national foundations in helping community colleges do the job they can do.

My vantage point as CEO of Jobs for the Future gives me the opportunity to look out broadly over jobs, the economy, and the changing nature of opportunity in America. We at JFF are fortunate in that our work spans high school reform, workforce development, and welfare reform. I have the benefit of seeing how these systems come together—or do not come together. Today I will use our experience at Jobs for the Future over the last six months in creating and staffing the MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Awards, which will be presented at the American Association of Community College meeting in April to

two community colleges that have excelled in putting together the pieces of their institutions for the advancement agenda. Six finalists were selected for this award, and two will receive grants of \$30,000 from MetLife Foundation. I will draw my remarks from the work of these six finalists because they are remarkable in the example they provide of accelerating advancement for low-income students.

Why Accelerating Advancement for Low-Income Students Is Important

Let me start with why accelerating advancement is so important.

When we look back at these early years of the twenty-first century, we will see that we are in the middle of the early stages of two critical historical shifts. The first one is the set of economic changes that are producing growing economic income disparity in the United States and a widening gulf between the have and the have nots that is greater than at almost any other time in our history. When we look over the world today, we know what an enormous threat it is to have so many people see no path forward to opportunity.

The second major shift is a major reconfiguring of our education system for the twenty-first century. This is happening in bits and pieces, so it is hard to see the whole of it at any one point in time. But if you look over the last decade, you will see an enormous swirling and churning: for example, the blurring of lines between for profit and not-for-profit institutions and the growth in distance learning, technology-enabled learning, new kinds of high schools, corporate universities, and institutions of higher education. When we see this settle out, say 10 years from now, we will understand this as the beginning of an historic shift in how this country organizes itself to get the education job done.

A few quick examples. In 1984, there were only 400 corporate universities in America; as of today, there are 2,000, and corporate universities are the fastest-growing segment of higher education. As of the year 2000, there were 1,500 virtual universities, including collaborations between community colleges and other institutions of higher education. When you add that capacity to the 3,400 institutions of higher education in America, you can get some idea of the size of the changes that we are embarked on.

Community colleges are central players in these dramas, and they will have a major role to play in determining whether we are writing an ultimate ending that will be a happy or a sad one from the point of view of people who need access to college yet have a hard time getting ahead in our economy.

Let me talk about two drivers for change that will force community colleges to adapt how they do business, whether they want to or not: the economic changes that are making postsecondary credentials a minimum requirement for labor market success in America; and the demographic forces that will pressure all the

institutions of higher education, and community colleges in particular, to better serve low-income and low-skill populations.

Let me talk first about the economic changes.

In 1959, only 20 percent of American workers needed at least some college to do their jobs well, but today more than half do. By some estimates, 80 percent of new jobs require postsecondary education, and college credentials have become, in essence, the dividing line between a job that pays a family-supporting income and a life of entry-level employment and poverty.

A college graduate earns 70 percent more today than a high school graduate, and growing income disparities relate closely to education. Even one year of postsecondary education increases lifetime earnings. The unemployment rate for high school dropouts is four times that of college graduates.

A low level of educational attainment at the beginning of a working life sets a person up for a persistent pattern of under-investment. As you know, employers tend to give work-based learning opportunities to people who already have education, particularly those who have postsecondary education. And it is very difficult in this country for low-income, part-time workers to get aid to attend postsecondary education.

Accompanying these economic trends, which in themselves are serious and require changes in how we do business, are changes in the composition of new college-goers that make business as usual an inadequate response from postsecondary institutions. Anthony Carnevale of Educational Testing Service has done research showing that by the year 2015, the traditional college age population, 18-24 year olds, will increase by over 4 million young people, and at the same time, because this generation of parents for this population has a larger proportion of college graduates than preceding generations, we can expect a larger proportion of this cohort will seek to go on to postsecondary education.

Together the demographic forces and the economic forces will reverse the trend we have seen in the 1980s and early 1990s, when college enrollments rose relatively slowly, and students over 25 years of age were the main source of growth.

If you look at this coming bulge of college age, 18-24 year olds, white, young people are projected to remain the majority, growing by about 800,000, or 4 percent, but youth of color are expected to grow by 3.5 million, or 40 percent. Hispanic youth alone will account for about half the coming boom in this age group, with Hispanic undergraduate numbers projected to grow by 73 percent by the year 2015, and Hispanics passing African Americans as the nation's fastest-growing college minority by the year 2006.

If current educational levels persist, a large number of these young people will not complete a postsecondary credential, at a huge loss to themselves, to our

economy, and to our nation. We know that we have a general problem with college completion rates in this country. While three-quarters of high school graduates go on to college, half leave with no degree and a third never come back after the freshman year. And college completion rates are especially problematic for low-income youth and youth of color.

As Robert McCabe has shown, if you are born in the United States of America in the year 2002 into a family that makes an annual income of \$25,000 or less, you have only a 6 percent of ever completing a baccalaureate degree. If you are black or Latino, the numbers are similar. That is a national scandal, and it is something that the community colleges have a unique role and a unique opportunity in helping close.

Community Colleges Are Well-Positioned to Fill the Gap

Community colleges are very well-positioned to fill this gap, but doing so requires changes, particularly in the incentives your institutions have and in their capacity to take on new roles.

Why do community colleges have such an advantage in helping to bridge this opportunity divide?

I think you know the reasons:

- Your colleges offer a wide range of kinds of programs, from developmental education to academic and career preparation.
- Your students can navigate from different entry points to a range of different program options, and colleges can develop hybrid kinds of programs that help accelerate progression through developmental courses into academic and vocational courses.
- Community colleges are relatively flexible and responsive.
- Community colleges are closer to the employer community.
- Community colleges have a commitment to quality instruction and being a teaching institution, unlike many of the other organizations in the workforce development and English as a second language system. You belong to the culture of education rather than the culture of training, and that is a key asset in today's economy.

But, as I said, moving forward is not going to be easy. For example, your institutions are under pressure about degree-completion rates, even with questions about whether or not that is a fair barometer for your performance. It's an issue that we can expect to come under closer scrutiny as state legislators and policymakers grapple with: in an era of declining resources, how to hold all institutions of higher education accountable for results?

Let me just give you one statistic on that regard: minority students, low-income students, and recent immigrants are the populations that have the hardest time climbing the steps of the educational ladder to an Associate's degree, let alone to beyond it to a B.A. African Americans, who represent 16 percent of the 15-18-year-old population, earn only 10 percent of all Associate's degrees. Hispanics, who constitute 14 percent of that population, earn only 7 percent of all Associate's degrees.

So there are many challenges before us, including:

- Very strong cultures and policies keep the non-credit and credit sides of the institutions far apart from each other.
- Low-income students face barriers in being able to come and go through a degree course in a straight line. They work part-time and often have family responsibilities.
- Students with serious developmental education needs have a hard time moving out of developmental education courses into credit-bearing courses.

And the list goes on. I want to talk about some of the strategies that are emerging as particularly effective in bridging these gaps and in creating pathways to advancement for low-income populations in America. As I said, I draw my examples from the wonderful six institutions selected as finalists for the MetLife Award for Community College Excellence.

Strategies for Serving Low-Income Populations More Effectively

As we looked over the applicants for the MetLife Award, we found that their strategies cluster into three critical areas. Implementing these strategies well will certainly benefit low-income students, but it will also benefit any learner who comes into a community college system. Indeed, any college that can do these things well is going to be a college that's fulfilling its multiple missions in a powerful way.

The three areas are strategies for:

- *Access* in terms of improving access to their institutions, particularly to credentialed programs;
- *Retention* of students through to degree completion; and
- *Advancement* for helping students who come into the community college progress to further education and employment at a family-supporting wage.

Let me start with the issue of access and the special efforts of two of the finalists for the MetLife awards, West Hills Community College in California's San

Joaquin Valley, and Sinclair Community College, in inner-city Dayton, Ohio. [Ed. these two institutions won the MetLife Community College Excellence Awards.]

West Hills serves a rural, primarily migrant population, and its highest priority has been increasing access for Hispanic-Latino populations. Over the past six years, it has implemented a variety of solutions, including very aggressive outreach to K-12 and out-of-school youth programs. As a result, it has doubled its enrollment in past six years, reversing previous declining enrollments and growing at three times the state average. West Hills is one of California's few rural community colleges that has increased its transfer rate to the four-year college system.

Here are some of the things West Hills Community College has done:

- West Hills has created a van service to open up access to the college, given that 90 percent of the students are in need of transportation just to get to the college.
- It has established high-quality, on-campus child care centers.
- With 50 percent of the students speaking Spanish as their primary language, it has invested heavily in ESL programs—and gone beyond that. To ensure that ESL students can advance to credit-bearing and career programs, the college provides interpreters in occupational classes.
- Because the employer base in their regional economy is limited, the college has targeted expansion of its occupational courses to respond to community needs, such as child care certification, heavy equipment operation, and truck and bus driver training.
- New allied health programs are centered on the needs of the region and have helped to attract a state mental health facility.

Sinclair Community College, in inner-city Dayton, operates in a very different environment. To increase its access and outreach to the community, it has targeted zip codes in the area that have high percentages of African-American and Appalachian residents. The effort has paid off: in 2000, enrollments rose 4 percent from Appalachian neighborhoods and about 3 percent from black neighborhoods. The numbers of students applying for financial aid increased 23 percent, and first generation college-goers rose from 23 percent to 31 percent of the student body. A dedicated effort across the institution has paid off.

This is a very poor community. Dayton neighborhoods have double the statewide average of low-income households and high dropout rates from the public school system—43 percent. So the college has reached out to out-of-school youth programs, to the high schools, and to the workforce development system to draw under-served populations into its programs. It has restructured its occupational programs so that working adults can enroll and advance more easily. It has made accelerated education a priority in response to working adults. For example, the developmental education division, which serves 42 percent of the college's

students, is moving toward more flexible scheduling, a supportive, self-paced curricula, and curricular integration from the developmental education programs into high-demand occupational programs. Sinclair now offers 31 different competency-based, short-term certificate programs that are much more responsive to the time constraints faced by adults who are trying to balance work and family and ongoing education. It has done an enormous amount to partner with out-of-school youth programs and with high schools.

Retention and Persistence

Now let's turn to the issue of retention and persistence. The Manpower Development Research Corporation, which recently looked at this issue across a range of community colleges, has identified a number of strategies that leading institutions use to increase student retention. These strategies include:

- Student support centers;
- Location of public agencies on campus;
- Short-term certificate programs that make it easier for working adults to balance family and work and education;
- On-campus childcare;
- Financial aid for working adults;
- Improvements in the quality and integration of developmental education;
- Improvements in the integration of credit and non-credit courses; and
- Supported distance learning.

From the MetLife finalists, San Jacinto College North, outside of Houston, and Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina, offer some examples of these approaches.

In the mid-1990s, San Jacinto had fallen out of touch with its community's changing demographics, and the very future of the campus was in question in a region where under 10 percent of the adult population has a college credential. But five years ago, the college began a remarkable turnaround. Today a commitment to serving Hispanics and other minorities, who were the growing populations in need in that area, has unified the college leadership and its faculty and drives a reform agenda that is having dramatic results. San Jacinto has restructured and revitalized its developmental education programs. It has also stepped up recruitment efforts and streamlined the enrollment process. Moreover, efforts to keep students coming back once they enroll have made an enormous amount of headway. Minority enrollment is up more than 30 percent since 1996, and retention for African-American and Hispanic students has climbed by 17 percent.

Among the interesting things San Jacinto is doing is to initiate professional development programs for both full-time and adjunct faculty members on learning styles and on strategies for integrating developmental education into academic and occupational programs. And the college employs a number of retention-support specialists on campus.

Central Piedmont Community College is a very different institution in a very different economic environment. It has played a leading role in its community in economic development and workforce development, but it also has kept a high priority on helping low-skill/low-wage workers advance. It has a continuing education division that now serves not only more than 2,700 employers but also a growing number of English language learners. The local Hispanic population is growing faster than in any other area in the country, as shown by the most recent census report, and to serve this population, Central Piedmont has created a multi-level ESL program with curricula customized for and integrated with training in high-demand occupational programs.

Further, the college has restructured all its academic discipline programs to integrate the faculty in development education faculty with the academic faculty. The math department has about 26 faculty members, roughly half of whom are academic and half are developmental, and they all teach in the developmental education program. This gives faculty who teach the upper-division, credit-bearing math classes a sense of what is needed to help people advance, and it similarly helps developmental education faculty understand the requirements and standards of the upper-level classes.

Educational and Occupational Advancement

The last piece of the puzzle is advancement. This is where visionary college leaders are saying: it is not enough to get people to come to our institutions, it's not even enough to get them to complete a degree. What we need to be about is creating a magnet for advancement so that anyone who comes here finds it easy to go from one level to another in a way that means they will leave ultimately able to get a good job that pays a family-supporting wage or go on to baccalaureate education. As the president of Sinclair Community College explains, "We see our job as helping people move from \$7.00 per hour jobs to \$17.00 per hour careers."

Some of the leading kinds of innovations are being called pathways or community-ladder models, as institutions reorient their education and training in a way that takes typically distinct and disconnected learning programs and begins to link them into a transparent, logical, and linear progression upwards that addresses the realities of most low-income adults' lives and needs. These are adult literacy and basic education courses that can lead quickly to a GED or high school diploma, occupational bridge courses that then can lead working adults into occupational training for skilled jobs, and so on, up the ladder.

An interesting college in this regard is Community College of Vermont, a statewide system that has made the transfer to the University of Vermont a high priority for all of its students, 80 percent of whom are first-generation college-goers and 47 percent of whom who were unprepared for college courses when they first enrolled. This college has no campus and no permanent faculty members. It has decided to put all its resources into highly customized, learner-driven strategies so that any person in Vermont can get to a community college location within 25 miles. CCV classes and even online offerings are capped at 20 students per class; the average hovers around 12. Through a range of creative supports and creative programming, it has achieved a transfer rate of 50 percent, far higher than the national average, and transfer students have a higher GPA than the University of Vermont average.

The last example is Portland Community College in Oregon, which has put it all together to create pathways to advancement. PCC has worked hard to improve the connections between its credit and non-credit divisions. The college has teams of faculty members and administrators that are co-designing short-term training options that lead both to jobs and to credits toward long-term credentials. These are accelerated courses, taught by credit-side faculty using credit-side curricula. ESL training is being integrated into their allied health and information technology and management careers pathways so that students with language difficulties can advance quickly in training programs that lead to employment. PCC has restructured its manufacturing technology program to include an open-entry/open-exit, competency-based option so students can sign up for short, subject-specific modules, with specific learning activities and competencies based on industry standards and employer input. Then, working at their own pace, students can take exams to demonstrate the competencies whenever they feel ready, and move on to the next level. The college has a learning center that is open 12 hours a day. Some students have been able to earn two-year certificates or credentials in one year.

PCC also is a leader in reaching out to give advancement opportunities to underserved youth and adults. It serves more than 100,000 students and enrolls more freshman and sophomores in credit programs than does the entire state university system in the state of Oregon. Over 2,000 high school students enroll at Portland Community College, making it the largest high school in Portland.

Support for Innovation

Many institutions could give an equal number of stories and strategies that work to improve access, retention, and advancement. So, stepping back, we have to ask: if this agenda is of critical importance for our country, and it is something that we know how to do, how can we do better, and what are the big challenges that we need to face together?

The challenges fall into a couple of categories. The first is the simple issue of capacity. Doing this is hard, and little in the existing institutional infrastructure rewards either leaders or faculty members who start to try to put the pieces together in this new way. Community colleges are moving fast, they are adapting to many shifting changes and needs in their regions. There is an issue of capacity in simply being able to put in place these kinds of programs and these kinds of strategies.

A second challenge is that of financing. In addition to the disparity between the amount of state money that large urban institutions get versus other kinds of institutions, many states do not fund the non-credit courses or do so at a lower rate. They do not have effective financial-aid policies for encouraging these kinds of career ladder courses.

As state policymakers begin to ask the questions of accountability and performance, it is time to put on the agenda this broader set of issues about advancement and retention and what it will take to do this and to do it well. Therefore, the final challenge is incentives: making it worthwhile to do what many of the best institutions are already doing because of their beliefs and their passions and despite the state's reward system. If you look at the demographic and economic factors I started with, conversations about performance and access are going to be happening more and more. State legislators are going to be asking how they can get more for less out of our education system. Many of them do not have a well-informed sense of what it actually takes to go the distance, particularly for students who are at the most risk for being left behind.

These are challenges that institutions need to take on in and of themselves. They also are challenges that will require community partnerships, partnerships with high schools and community-based organizations and employers. They are certainly challenges that will require changes in public policy. I hope that all of you as institutions and the League for Innovation in the Community College as a leadership organization can be part of the voices bringing these sets of issues and these innovative strategies higher on the radar screen of our leadership and the public in America. We at Jobs for the Future would be happy to do anything we can do to help you, because when it comes down to it, there is no more important challenge or more important test of leadership than this one: whether or not this wealthy nation of ours in this twenty-first century can help all of its people, and particularly those who are poor and least well-served, to have a path into the American dream through higher education. I commend all of you for what you are doing in that regard and challenge you to lift it higher and take it farther.

Thank you.