
NEW ROLES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES: EXPANDING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

By Sibyl Jacobson and Marlene Seltzer

Juanita Saucedo, a migrant farmworker in California's San Joaquin Valley, ran the cotton gin from sunset to sunrise. Because she worked the nightshift, she was having a hard time caring for her teen-age daughter. Desperate for a route to a better job, she turned to a training program run in partnership with her local community college. No one in her family had ever attended college, but Saucedo enrolled and eventually landed a job as a translator and adviser to other students at the college.

As another graduation season is upon us, we need to focus not just on the four-year colleges, but on two-year community colleges, as well. Across the nation, about 45 percent of all college freshmen now attend community colleges, according to the U.S.

Department of Education. In many states, community college enrollments are growing faster than any other segment of higher education.

Unfortunately, community colleges are often undervalued, and they often lose political battles to prestigious and politically connected four-year colleges. Some states are trimming support for community colleges in response to budget shortfalls. And many colleges have much work to do to raise the quality of instruction, forge effective connections to local employers and jobs, and improve completion and transfer rates.

Quality community colleges are particularly important for low-income students and first-generation college-goers. They reach people who four-year schools often shun: students who did poorly in high school; adults trying to juggle school, family, and work; new immigrants with language barriers constraining their career options; individuals from families living in poverty.

Serving this diverse mix of young

people and adults is not easy. Many students need flexible schedules, with classes at night and on weekends. Often without cars, they may need classes close to home or easily reached by public transportation. They sometimes need extra tutoring and help addressing life crises that can derail them from their studies.

Unfortunately, tuition costs, even at community colleges, can be a serious obstacle, particularly as tight state budgets are translating into tuition hikes.

To attract low-income students and keep them enrolled and learning, community colleges have had to rethink the way they "do college." With limited resources and a host of financial and programmatic

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West Hills Community College, where Saucedo earned her credential, has reversed declining enrollments by hiring Spanish-speaking counselors who go to schools, churches, and community meetings and into the fields to recruit new students.

In Dayton, Ohio, Sinclair Community College is redesigning the curriculum of popular occupational programs into short modules that fit better with the lives of working adults. The college is also rolling remedial instruction into technical courses so that some immigrants, and others in need of both basic skills and employment, can move quickly through courses that qualify them for good jobs.

Both these colleges—one a small, rural college serving a largely migrant Hispanic population, and the other a large, urban school that is part of an effort to rebuild a troubled regional economy—are changing the lives of their community's low-income families. The credentials students earn if they persevere can mean the difference between being mired in poverty and climbing the ladder into the middle class.

These colleges will need help to improve the opportunities they provide in their communities.

They will need more equitable and generous funding from state and local governments. Federal student aid should be more readily available to working adults who attend school part-time.

Innovative colleges need access to investment capital to help redesign programs to be more responsive to the needs of low-income working people. Federal welfare and workforce laws should promote community college enrollment, not make it more difficult.

Community colleges also need support and partnerships from their local businesses, community organizations and government. We need to invest in and support America's community colleges. Like Saucedo, other students will need our nation's help in reducing poverty and expanding opportunity.

Sibyl Jacobson is president and CEO of MetLife Foundation. Marlene Seltzer is president of Boston-based Jobs for the Future, which is administering the MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Awards.

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