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Career Success for All: The Equity Role of Community Colleges in Career Preparation

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To ensure community colleges realize their mission of promoting equity, numerous reform efforts have shifted their focus from student access to student success.¹ These student success reform efforts have placed a great deal of emphasis on completion – a measure of whether students remain in their programs long enough to earn a community college credential – but not as much emphasis on ensuring that those who complete credentials go on to find career success. Yet most students come to college seeking economic opportunity: When asked why they enrolled in college, the most common reason students cite is their desire to enter into a good career.² Regardless of the path they take through the community college – transfer or workforce or both – they see the promise of a college education as the ability to earn a good living.

Colleges have an essential role to play in helping students move along a path to a better life, and completion is a key step in that journey. Particularly for students from historically marginalized groups, this path can lead them out of poverty and into the middle class.³ Current institutional reform efforts have begun to recognize the importance of students' career success. For example, reform efforts focused on career pathways seek to ensure that programs have multiple entry and exit points that allow for advancement through ongoing education and work opportunities and also provide the support and advising resources necessary to keep students moving forward.⁴ The guided pathways reform efforts have prompted colleges to examine institutional practices in a holistic way to make pathways clearer and easier to navigate, and to help students gain a better understanding of where they are going, what their goal in college is, and how their studies will get them there.⁵ Within the context of these reforms, this issue brief presents career success as a central part of the community college equity mission and examines how to extend the concept of success to include career success.

Done well, career preparation is about equity. The historical practice of tracking students from marginalized groups into narrowly targeted workforce programs raises concerns over placing too much emphasis on career preparation over the development of general skills. Colleges must

carefully consider how they influence students' career paths to ensure students reach their full potential.⁶ Such concerns should not discourage institutions from focusing on career development, however; colleges have an opportunity to help students plan for careers with the goal of alleviating past and present inequalities. Failing to do so can, in fact, have a negative impact on students because leaving them on their own to figure out their careers can reinforce existing dynamics of inequality.⁷ With intentionality and awareness of historical inequalities, colleges can play a more equalizing role in their support of students' career development.

Community colleges offer an array of pathways that lead to the workforce. These include programs that prepare people for well-paying occupations requiring technical skills that can be learned in two years or less, such as radiology technicians, machinists, or paralegals.⁸ These also include short-term training needed to enter a first job on a career pathway, with additional education is needed to advance to a better career, as well as short-term training to advance within more advanced careers. They also include the numerous programs that are designed to transfer to four-year degrees. But simply completing a community college program or transferring to a four-year college is not enough to promote equity and career success among the wide variety of students who make up the community college population. Colleges can and should help all students achieve success in their preparation and transition to careers, regardless of program.

Career development efforts are necessary to help students translate their educational credentials into career success. Career development is an ongoing process of learning and gaining experiences, and most students can benefit from support and resources to further their career preparation.⁹ The career-development process should begin early in the education pathway to help students make more effective decisions and build experiences to help achieve career success. Given the variation in community college programs and the size and characteristics of their student populations, it is important to recognize there are many approaches to promoting career success; there is no one-size-fits-all approach.¹⁰

Following are some broad ideas to guide the development of strategies to promote community college students' career success; these ideas are intended to build on current reform efforts including career pathways and guided pathways.

1) Make sure pathways lead students someplace valuable.

Colleges inherently guide their students' career decisions simply by choosing which programs to offer. When a college offers a particular program, it implicitly communicates to students that there is value in completing it. This is particularly crucial to disadvantaged students, who have limited time and financial resources to dedicate to their education. Colleges must ensure that all workforce programs not only actually lead to jobs but also generate the potential for career advancement. Colleges must consider what data to rely on to make these decisions and recognize that engagement between colleges and industry is important.¹¹ At the same time, the ability to transfer is essential, as a goal of many college students – including both those

pursuing liberal arts and those pursuing workforce-oriented programs – is to get bachelor’s degrees. For this reason, colleges should make sure programs transfer and that students receive and understand information on how to successfully make that transfer; few programs should be truly terminal.¹² Similarly, colleges should make sure that non-credit offerings articulate into credit, where appropriate, to ensure that all learning is recognized and valued.

2) Advise students about careers.

A key part of career success is advisement. Students tend to enter college with the vague notion that finishing college – specifically, earning a bachelor’s degree – will help them get a good job, but many have little idea of what jobs are available and what they might actually like to do.¹³ Students’ knowledge of and perceptions of careers are not equal, and this inequity can affect their choices and, ultimately, their career trajectories.¹⁴ In general, the career decision-making process is ongoing as students learn about and explore different careers and majors.¹⁵ This process happens through both planned and unplanned experiences.¹⁶ Options can be constrained by each student’s perceptions of what is possible for them based on their personal background and identity characteristics.¹⁷ With this in mind, colleges play an essential role in supporting students’ exploration of career options – from the very moment they enroll to when they select and move along a particular pathway. College advising, especially, has an important function in raising students’ awareness about possible career paths and guiding them in how to prepare for those careers, including establishing a clear academic path. Staff must consider adapting advising structures to best meet students’ needs at their different stages of enrollment by, for example, balancing the roles of general advisors and faculty advisors, as well as examining the role of technology in advising. Colleges need to consider how to take effective advising practices to scale to reach all students, not just those that seek out advising.

3) Ensure students develop skills for careers.

As students develop ideas about what they want to do, they need to develop skills and competencies that will help them be successful in their careers. Since all pathways ultimately lead to employment, all programs need to convey skill and find ways for programs to connect classroom learning to students’ career preparation. Competency-based learning models can help make this connection clearer, regardless of pathway.¹⁸ In workforce programs, these connections may be very evident as students participate in learning activities that directly relate to their career goals. In these programs, a concern is the balance between more general skills that will adapt over time versus more industry-specific skills that are immediately needed for the job market.¹⁹ In liberal arts transfer programs, career preparation may seem less immediately relevant, but students are developing more general skills of value in the labor market. However, students in these programs also need to consider career possibilities and ways to gain experiences that will further their career development in addition to the general skills emphasized in the liberal arts.²⁰ All students, regardless of pathway, need learning experiences outside the traditional classroom – including high-impact experiences that develop

career-relevant skills such as internships, research, learning communities, and service learning – that can complement these general skills.²¹

4) Convey social capital to students.

Since most jobs are found through personal connections, helping students build social capital is an essential element to promoting equity in career success.²² Students need help gaining access to key social networks, particularly those students who do not have such contacts in their personal networks. This is where colleges can have a major impact on career success equity among their students. Through their deep local connections, community colleges are uniquely poised to be the link between students and local employers. The local reputation of community colleges is important as employers get to know each institutions' degrees and programs.²³ Colleges can expand their institutional reputation intentionally through targeted relationship-building efforts aimed at local employers.²⁴ Relationship building can happen at every level of the college: From top administrators to faculty and college staff, all personnel can play unique roles in developing and promoting relationships with employers. Having so many actors involved means that relationship building is not a simple or predictable process; rather, it is one that requires both structure and organization to coordinate efforts, as well as freedom and spontaneity to let relationships evolve and develop. Faculty are often well positioned to cultivate relationships with employers, particularly in workforce areas, but many lack the support they need to be able to dedicate time to cultivating these relationships. Activities like advisory boards provide good opportunities to establish employer connections, and colleges should consider ways to approach these activities to promote innovation and employer engagement. In addition to employers, colleges may consider outreach to their own alumni. An often untapped resource for developing social capital to help current students, alumni often stay local and have positive feelings toward the college.

5) Promote good jobs and economic development.

Community colleges are uniquely positioned as labor market intermediaries that can help to bridge the gap between individuals' education and training on one hand, and employers' hiring needs on the other.²⁵ By coordinating the education of individuals with the needs of local industry, community colleges are positioned to promote opportunity for workers while spurring economic development.²⁶ In this way, community colleges can make important regional impacts and ultimately help create more opportunities for students. Balancing the current needs of employers with those of students –as well as the future needs of industry – is a real concern. Colleges are encouraged to consider actively engaging with the labor market to improve job quality for graduates. Some colleges are asking the hard questions about whether to continue offering programs that no longer lead to careers that offer sustainable wages, how many students to graduate from these programs, or how to ensure that these programs lead to pathways with opportunities for advancement.

The bottom line is that career success is an essential part of the equity mission of community colleges that should be measured. To ensure equity, colleges have an important role to play in helping students begin to understand the world of work and how to navigate it effectively. It is essential for colleges to be aware of the responsibility they have to help their students get a broad view of the range of careers available to them; make good decisions about their own career goals; make connections and develop strong social networks; and generate the skills they need to succeed in employment in general and in the specific field they choose to enter. When possible, colleges should also help to shape the employment opportunities students will face in the labor market. Colleges need to be aware of these strategies to help students, and develop ways to measure their outcomes to ensure equity. When colleges do not do these things, they leave their students on their own to sink or swim.

About the Author

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