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Working Through Community Colleges

For donors who want to improve and expand career and technical education, working through community colleges should hold wide appeal. Community colleges allow donors to go beyond just serving young people, for instance, because they are also used by many adults to increase their skill levels mid-career. In many locales, the community college is also one of the better managed and more practical public institutions. Since their very genesis,

community colleges have aimed to connect their students directly to work. So the best community colleges tend to offer a kind of gold standard when it comes to vocational education.

Yet community colleges have an image problem. More than 12,000 such schools exist across the U.S., and these institutions educate over half of students in the country, but many are known for high dropout rates, lackluster academics, or irrelevant degrees. Some Americans, projecting what Monty Sullivan, president of the Louisiana Technical and College System, calls a “caste view,” perceive community colleges as warehousing poor-performing students who aren’t smart enough to enter four-year schools.

Many of these stigmas grow out of misperceptions or out-of-date understandings. Still others persist due to the huge number of mediocre community colleges across the nation. However, among those, there are stellar numbers of community colleges that produce job-ready graduates in an extraordinarily time-efficient, cost-effective process. Among other contributions, outstanding community colleges elevate many Americans from low-income backgrounds who would otherwise be stuck in ruts of low-wage, menial work. And many local business leaders will tell you that the track record of their nearby community college is more important to the economic health of their region than the most prestigious colleges.

Strong community colleges can be great equalizers in America. James Denova of the Benedum Foundation calls these local laboratories of learning “one of the best anti-poverty programs in the U.S.,” and points to their “affordability, open enrollment, remediation, and social supports for people who aren’t prepared for postsecondary education by our high-school system.” He adds, “I think we’re entering the era of community colleges. They’ve certainly started to get more recognition and respect in the last ten years.”

Donor Carrie Morgridge suggests that four-year schools can learn much from the adaptability, cost-control, and success with hard populations of well-run community colleges. “Higher education is going to have to have this huge makeover to catch up with what community colleges are now doing,” she says. “Community colleges are a powerful tool. We’ve found they are hungry to work in the communities in which they serve.”

Community colleges are an invention of America’s democratic tradition. “The community college is the only U.S.-born higher

education institution,” notes Eduardo Padron, president of Miami Dade College in south Florida. They remain today an almost exclusively American phenomenon.

Community colleges also offer one of today’s commonest portals into well-paying technology jobs. Continuing to excel at this task will allow community colleges to upend many traditional biases against two-year schools.

An important test of an effective community college is ensuring that learners actually leave with a degree or useful certification. Current statistics leave much room for improvement. Completion rates in many associate-degree programs hover around 30 percent. Many schools have miles to go to improve these ratios.



We have the most powerful economy in the world for putting unskilled people into jobs. The problem is that these jobs can be hard to move up from.

Also, too many community colleges are willing to coast along enrolling students in old-fashioned, low-paying fields that lack much career potential. Sometimes this is driven by administrators who would rather shape their institutions in a conventional academic mold and transfer their students on to other colleges, instead of operating as twenty-first century employment engines. “Many community colleges remain primarily focused on their traditional mission of simply feeding students into the four-year colleges, rather than training individuals for the workforce,” says economist Harry Holzer of the Brookings Institution.

Donors should understand that career and technical training and career pathways don’t preclude students from going on to obtain higher degrees. To the contrary, getting serious about a vocation is often the starting point for further study. The key is to give students choices. One can earn a credential and happily jump off the train there, or go on to complete an associate degree, or become a full-fledged engineer, chemist, or doctor. Career education focuses students on succeeding in school, whatever the terminus.

“The language and message needs to be about career pathways,” urges Denova. “It’s not about community college versus four-year programs.

It's helping students choose a career path that has different levels they might pursue at different points in their lives.”

If donors can help community colleges become practical connectors of people to work, many good overflow effects will result, argues Sandy Shugart, president of Orlando's Valencia College:

If you want to change a family, you have to change the circumstances of the head of the household. Very often I hear if you want to fix everything, you need to start at birth, or preschool. But the way to change a two-year-old's experience is to change the mom's experience. We need to focus on young adults who have a family to raise. If we change their economic trajectory with short, low-opportunity-cost training—particularly in an era when we have deep, pervasive skill shortages in areas that lend themselves to training—that's the way to really make a difference in American life.

Donor-supported community college efforts that lead the way

There are more than 1,000 community colleges in the U.S. Donors who want a handy list of good ones to study can look up the Aspen Institute's annual prize for community college excellence. It carries a \$1 million award, and is given out every other year. The organization's 2015 top pick was Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida, and the selection committee also honored nine runners-up.

The most career-oriented colleges integrate their course offerings with employer needs in their community. Rather than just offering an undifferentiated cafeteria menu of options, effective schools emphasize targeted courses of proven value, and provide a clear roadmap and guidance to get students from start to completion.

Miami Dade College in south Florida, for instance, has a current focus on the regional need for data analysts, air traffic controllers, animation and game developers, and physician assistants. When the college first noticed the growing gaming and animation industry in the Miami area, it sent a group to analyze Pixar Studios in California. The research team reported back, and the college created an animation and gaming program that includes a collaboration among Viacom, Nickelodeon, Disney, and Sony Pictures. Graduates earn an associate of science degree in computer-programming analysis, with a specialization in either gaming

or animation, and can expect to earn at least \$75,000 to \$80,000 per year. Miami Dade is supported by an active foundation that collects philanthropic donations and distributes the money to college priorities—\$11 million of donations in the latest year.

Colorado Mountain College, which has attracted the support of the Morgridge Family Foundation, provides career training at many of its 11 campuses scattered across the north-central Rocky Mountains. The college has partnered with local industries and public schools to build programs in electrical trades, welding, culinary arts, and more. The college operates an apprenticeship program that trains chefs for the many resort towns in the Rockies. Donor Carrie Morgridge recently funded welding certification courses at the Leadville campus, where that skill is an important part of the mining industry. It is a dual-enrollment program serving high-school seniors, who also earn college credit. The Morgridge Family Foundation commitment over two years was for \$75,000.

Lee College in Baytown, Texas, has a partnership with Chevron Phillips Chemical Company for technical training and mentorship that will feed well-credentialed workers into Chevron's nearby Cedar Bayou facility. The Benedum Foundation has established programs with community colleges in West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania, like the certificate and degree programs the foundation funded in 2009 at Eastern West Virginia Community & Technical College in wind turbine technology, created to support the burgeoning wind farms in that part of the country. Lorain Community College has established 22 career pathways in over 30 high schools near Cleveland, Ohio, with philanthropic support. Students start taking college classes early in their high-school career, and can complete a bachelor's degree by the age of 20, for 80 percent less than a conventional college track in the area.

Another area of specialization for community colleges is to help adult learners remedy gaps in their education, and then expand their workforce skills. There are many variations of what are known as adult basic education (ABE) programs. Less effective examples require extensive book learning before job-skill training begins, with the result that many learners drop out. There are more effective programs that integrate academic and hands-on instruction right from the beginning, and teach the two areas concurrently.

One top-ranking example is the I-BEST program originally launched at Seattle Central College in 2005. It has now spread statewide, and is being replicated in other states. I-BEST allows adult students to

take remedial courses while at the same time working toward a specific workforce credential, certification, or degree—a cocktail that has yielded crisp success.

Launched with financial support from the Lumina and Ford foundations, the program harnesses team teaching by pairing a basic-skills trainer with an academic instructor. These feed students both remedial and technical lessons simultaneously. I-BEST students have proven three times likelier than other adult students to earn college credit, and nine times likelier to earn a work credential.

“I-BEST transformed the way we educate low-income, low-skill, and immigrant adults to ensure their family’s empowerment and economic well-being,” says Jon Kerr of the Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges. “Students are no longer stuck in years of adult basic education and English language classes. They do these things while earning college credits and preparing for work, and learn with more motivation and more understanding.”

Two examples of donor investments in a local community college

During late 2014 and early 2015, the oil and gas industry shed an estimated 100,000 jobs. With that difficult economic backdrop, Karen Wright—CEO of one of the major industrial suppliers to the industry, gas-compressor manufacturer Ariel Corporation—faced a dilemma. She had always striven to never lay off her workforce, partly because she knew that skilled machinists and mechanics are difficult to replace once gone. But with the energy sector in a deep slump, what choice did she have?

A brainstorm made her realize there was an alternative. Rather than lay off employees, she decided to keep her workforce at a full-time 40 hour week, but allow employees to spend a portion of their work time enrolled at a technical college earning an associate degree, either in machine trades or mechanics. Wright and the Ariel Corporation had already laid the groundwork for this decision through intensive, strategic donations to local community colleges and tech schools in preceding years.

“It’s partly a strategy to keep our workers busy. But it’s also within a long-term vision of growing a valuable workforce, not just for ourselves, but for other manufacturers and for the oil and gas industry overall,” Wright told us.

Called a “quiet philanthropist” by the local newspaper, Wright has made a loud impact on the regional economy—through the combination

of jobs created at the Ariel Corporation and philanthropic investments in the education infrastructure of central Ohio. She and her team previously developed robust CTE curricula for use in training Ariel employees at Stark State, Central Ohio Technical College, Zane State, and the Knox County Career Center. “It’s a partnership where we develop the program for them, they provide the venue, and we pay them for the college credits our workers earn,” Wright says.

The Ariel Foundation also makes around \$5 million of gifts every year in Wright’s hometown of Mount Vernon, Ohio. Recent grants have supported engineering and nursing scholarships at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, and brought STEM training into the local public-school system. Wright aims to give at least 10 percent of her company’s annual profits to charitable causes.



Low-income workers need to see that training leads directly to better work. If they can’t see a light at the end of the tunnel, it’s too long of a tunnel.

“The more you give, the more you get, so to speak. Your success multiplies,” Wright states. “The Bible says ‘It’s more blessed to give than to receive.’ And I find that when you give you receive back tenfold. The joy of giving is real. It actually does result in good things happening from every perspective.”

Another female philanthropist with a strong interest in career and technical education is Penny Enroth. Her early investments in the area included a \$110,000 grant to Moore County schools in North Carolina to integrate Project Lead The Way into their curriculum. Soon she was working with Sandhills Community College. The college was scheduled to tear down an unused maintenance building on its property when they realized the building could be repurposed as an excellent trades instruction facility. Enroth’s Palmer Foundation made an initial investment of \$212,000 to fund the renovation and help revive the local economy. Operating in the shadow of the Research Triangle Park 70 miles north, the rural Sandhills region has suffered economically from declines in industry and tobacco farming.

The Palmer Trades Center is now an active venue for students pursuing credentials in production technology, electrical contracting, and advanced

welding. The training facility is impressive, and thanks to a grant from the Golden LEAF Foundation it is about to get an entirely new wing that will house machinery for training in computer numerical control machining. Since its trades program launched in 2013, Sandhills has graduated 154 students, with eight out of ten now holding jobs at area manufacturers such as Caterpillar, Unilever, and Butterball. To stay in sync with local businesses Sandhills maintains an advisory committee representing local employers. “We teach what the community needs,” notes Andi Korte of Sandhills. “And that has improved hiring rates for our students.”

The Palmer Foundation’s support for Sandhills now amounts to over half-a-million dollars. This has helped the college attract other grants. The Duke Energy Foundation has now given the college two grants totaling \$450,000 combined for CTE education, including one gift that allowed the purchase of a virtual welding machine for training purposes. The Golden LEAF Foundation put up \$750,000 for the 4,500 square foot expansion of the Palmer Trades Center. And a corporate donor, Victory Technology, has donated valuable welding equipment and a plasma cutter.

“We’re not a large foundation,” says Enroth. “But we take risks. And so we’re a little fish that attracts bigger fish.”

Three other community colleges with CTE bents

Rio Salado College

A premier career-oriented community college located just outside of Phoenix, Rio Salado College serves 57,000 students—30,000 of them online—from a total of 47 states. The largest online community college in the U.S., it offers more than 500 Internet-based courses, and hundreds more in person, in 122 programs of study that lead to 26 associate degrees and 87 different types of certificates. The college also provides strong student services—access to advisers, site-based tutoring, and 13 different regional sites. “Online learning has been criticized in the past for not having enough support services, so we’ve invested heavily in those to ensure that our students have all the help they need,” says president Chris Bustamante.

In particular, RSC strives to channel students either directly into careers, or as transfers into four-year schools. To lead students toward useful end points and careers, the college has created several programs:

- *Rio Compass* is a degree tracker that helps students make sure their class selections lead efficiently to degree completion.

It is supported by funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which also covers predictive analytics, peer mentors, and career coaches.

- *Rio Learn* includes a dashboard that shows students what assignments they need to complete.
- *Rio Pace* allows students to monitor their progress in a course, compare their data to others in the same course, and see if they are on track for success.

Rio gives students many entry and exit points into classes—48 start dates per year mean that scores of new courses begin every week. This helps working adults who enroll to upgrade their skill level. Enrollees flock to its skill centers where they can get short-term three- to four-week training opportunities of that lead to higher-paying jobs.

One group attracted to RSC's combination of flexibility and affordability (courses average \$84 per credit hour) is women with children, who make up 60 percent of the student body. Rio Salado also makes special efforts to provide career education to veterans, incarcerated prisoners and ex-offenders, and juvenile delinquents (it served 2,820 incarcerated youth in 2014). Rio provides adult basic education classes to 10,000 high-school dropouts every year. Some of these enroll in a track that allows them to earn up to 25 college credits while finishing their GED.

Rio Salado College has been widely lauded for its accomplishments. A McKinsey & Company report found it to be one of the top eight higher-education institutions in the country in terms of efficiency and productivity. In addition to major funding from the Gates Foundation that helped the college create its online courses and expand its local campuses, Rio has built itself up with support from the Pulliam, Lumina, Carr Family, and Helios Education foundations, the Carstens Family Funds, the Griffith Insurance Education Foundation, and other donors.

Valencia College

Along with the tourist businesses for which it is known, Orlando, Florida, is becoming a home for high-tech industries in aviation, aerospace, and biotechnology. Sandy Shugart, president of Valencia College, describes his city as “a tale of two economies.” There are significant numbers of skilled jobs, and lots of entry-level work that is low-paid.

“We have the most powerful economy in the world for putting unskilled people into jobs,” Shugart explains. “The problem is that these

jobs are hard to move up from. It takes two body lengths to reach the next rung on the ladder.”

Valencia College’s mission is to add more rungs to the economic ladder. Although the school mainly transfers its students to four-year colleges, it is increasingly making special efforts for working adults, ages 25 to 45, who want to upskill their way to better pay. The school has created what it calls its “career-express” model—intensive, short bursts of training, in collaboration with nonprofits and companies, that immediately produce a valuable credential.

Administrators learned early on that a traditional academic model—here’s a list of classes, now take a few—was ineffective at retaining adult learners. Students were too easily derailed by circumstances like a car breakdown or child-care problem. The school reduced these obstacles by condensing schedules so classes could be completed in a short burst. Students who would struggle to maintain momentum in a two-year degree program are able to add classes to their normal work and home responsibilities for an intensive three- to five-week period. More generally, classes were refocused on the end result most students were seeking: a better job, a better life.

“We tried to understand the value proposition from the student’s point of view,” says Shugart. “The value proposition has to be about the end result—work—and not about the training itself. They can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. It’s too long of a tunnel. But if we take them through a series of very short tunnels, where the opportunity cost of lost wages while they’re in school is small, they’re perfectly willing to enroll.”

Stackable credentials make this practical. Each completed course has immediate value. And students who add more modules down the road can improve their employment prospects even more. In manufacturing, for example, Valencia offers ten certifications, clumped in areas like digital controls, welding, and mechatronics. These are skills local employers have made clear they need immediately. And the more credentials a student piles up, the more they augment their earning power.

In addition to its career express credentialing effort, Valencia offers around 90 associate degree programs in technical fields. Some of the most popular choices including nursing, cardiovascular technology, engineering technologies, entertainment-related technologies, criminal justice, and paralegal studies. Fully 70,000 students are enrolled on six campuses sprinkled across the two-county area surrounding Orlando. Post-graduation services

are also big at Valencia. The college works with the local workforce board to try to have a job waiting for every graduating student.

In an interview on one of his campuses, Shugart suggested many ways donors can help community colleges boost career training. One idea is to fund what he terms “SOS” grants. Valencia staff identify serious students who are struggling to pay their bills, and then offer assistance to meet emergency needs, with the goal of ensuring they remain enrolled in school. More generally, Shugart suggests that philanthropists focus on providing the kinds of services that keep people “engaged and afloat” as they pursue training. In Orlando, for instance, Goodwill Industries provides services such as family counseling, housing assistance, career guidance, and substance-abuse mediation, with donor funding.

“A \$1 million gift has ten times as much leverage here as it would at some highly branded university,” argues Shugart. “Colleges like ours offer a whole lot more leverage on a donation aimed at increasing social mobility.”

Red Rocks Community College

Nestled in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains, Red Rocks Community College is the only community college in the nation to offer a master’s degree (in medical science), and the only community college in Colorado to offer a bachelor’s degree (in water management). The school is a popular choice for transfer students, being the top feeder to the Colorado School of Mines. But it is also carving a niche for career and technical education that leads students directly to real-world applications in the job market.

About 60 percent of Red Rock students are enrolled in CTE programs, including health care, computer technology, business, cosmetology, graphic design, fine woodworking, emergency medical service, fire science, accounting, construction, auto service, and renewable energy trades. There is a special emphasis on STEM instruction. The school has a strong concurrent-enrollment program for high-school students, who can earn credits and even associate degrees when they complete high school.

The college keeps its thumb to the pulse of the local economy. When a local mining company laid off several hundred workers, Red Rocks switched into high gear in early 2016 and offered special CTE options to the displaced employees. “One of the great things about Red Rocks is that we’re able to respond to local needs and be nimble,” says Ron Slinger, who directs the school’s nonprofit foundation. The college has a large career advisory board which meets twice a year to discuss changes in the economy and growing employer needs.

Red Rocks has a special training pathway for individuals transitioning out of prison. The Gateway Program starts ex-offenders with nine credit hours of introductory courses on study skills and career development, and requires a paper in which the person's background, obstacles, and opportunities are assessed. Enrollees then matriculate into the general student population, with the availability of strong support services, including help with transportation and housing. While the three-year recidivism rate for former prisoners is 50 percent nationally, graduates of the Gateway Program are rearrested less than 5 percent of the time.



Too many donors support only their alma maters and flagship universities, overlooking the immense value that a career-savvy community college can bring to a region.

A sector-wide approach

An ambitious example of several community colleges joining together to cultivate a powerful local workforce comes from the Houston-Galveston region of Texas. Starting in 2013, ExxonMobil offered grants totaling \$1.5 million to establish the Community College Petrochemical Initiative. It brings together nine Gulf Coast community colleges to pursue three overarching goals: to convince young people that work in the petrochemical industry is desirable, recruit faculty to teach petrochemical topics (not easy because anyone capable of teaching can earn far more working in the industry), and train enrolled students.

The initiative currently focuses on 14 very specific job types valued in the energy industry. One product of the collaborative is the online site EnergizeHouston.org which provides a detailed listing of the numbers of jobs available at regional energy companies, projected job growth through 2026, and their median pay. These are linked to the fields of study needed to master the job, and information on the nine community colleges offering training.

Recruiting qualified workers in the petrochemical field is reaching emergency status in southeast Texas. An aging workforce is retiring in large numbers, and an estimated \$35 billion in future plant expansions is in the works. There may be no other area of the country producing

more opportunities for work for individuals willing to acquire specialized skills. “We don’t call them jobs. We call them careers, because they last a lifetime and they pay well,” explains Dennis Brown, president of Lee College, which leads the collaboration.

There are many ways to invest in community colleges

Although community colleges are public entities, donors have many ways they can invest. Providing infrastructure like a new workshop or industry-standard machines can stimulate much useful activity. Donors can provide scholarships for students who aspire to a technical career but have economic need. They can fund nonprofits that provide wraparound services to students to help them stay enrolled. In some of the more expensive, cutting-edge fields such as biotechnology, regular investments are necessary to keep equipment and training up to date. Some philanthropists may want to help recruit crucial faculty to career-training tracks, to fund career counselors who link students to employers, or to create a job-mapping system that will allow a college to show adult workers how upgrading their skills can lead them to better positions.

Publicizing outstanding career training by a community college can be important in getting other donors over a key hurdle: the tendency of many philanthropists to target only prominent four-year colleges with their grantmaking. Too many donors support only their alma maters and flagship universities, overlooking the immense value that a career-savvy community college can bring to a region. There may be no better instrument available across America today than community colleges when it comes to improving economic mobility—and donors have a key role to play.