

Five Strategies to Help Low-Income Adults and Youth Attain Community College Credentials

These ideas were submitted to the White House Community College Summit online discussion at <http://communitycollege.ideascale.com/>.

1) Streamlined education and training programs that smooth the path to degrees and credentials

Today's education and training systems – including community colleges, adult basic education and English language programs, and workforce training programs – too often are disconnected and inadequate due to the rules that govern them. The journey to a postsecondary credential requires lower-skilled students to navigate several different public systems and various organizations, yet oftentimes these public systems are disconnected and siloed, making it difficult or impossible for a student to quickly move to successively higher levels of education. For example, a student who completes a GED program will not necessarily meet the basic education standards for or receive guidance on entrance into postsecondary education. Similarly, short-term training programs are often dead-ends and don't lead to further education or high-wage jobs.

The career pathways framework is an effective way of connecting education, training, and support services to prepare students and workers for the next level of education and training and to meet employer demand for skilled workers. Each step on a career pathway is designed explicitly to prepare students to progress to the next level of employment and education. They include multiple entry points (not just high school) and innovative program delivery such as flexible scheduling and integration of basic skills education and occupational training. They also include a strong role for employers and student supportive services.

The federal government can support career pathways by investing in Career Pathways State Policy Leadership Grants to strengthen and align adult basic education/ESL, postsecondary education, career and technical education, and workforce development systems in a career pathways framework. In addition, several states have adopted career pathway-inspired programming to help lower-skilled adults earn credentials including Arkansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin.

2) Seed and scale-up innovative models that help lower-skilled working adults and disadvantaged youth earn community college credentials

Today's community college students are more diverse than ever and face many more challenges than traditional students in the past. To succeed, they need new and more innovative teaching and delivery strategies. Pockets of proven innovative strategies and practices exist in community colleges across the country, but few of these are ever scaled up to become the new way of doing business.

One promising innovation that deserves more support is short, intensive remedial bridge programs for those at the lowest literacy levels that integrate basic academic and/or English language education with postsecondary occupational training to help students earn credentials more quickly. Bridge programs are basically dual enrollment – but for lower-skilled adults.

Other promising innovations include more flexible scheduling and delivery modes and program modularization which groups courses within a longer program into manageable 'chunks' for students to get through more easily. At least six states have

adopted or implemented bridge initiatives: Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, and Wisconsin, and Washington. On the federal level, the new Community College and Career Training grant program can also be shaped to support bridge programming.

3) Better intelligence on how students progress through education and training systems, especially for lower-skilled students who have the greatest distance to travel

Existing federal, state, and institutional data systems produce very little useful intelligence on how well students are progressing into and through community colleges. The primary national data source for postsecondary education, IPEDS, does not even provide data on the graduation rates for part-time students who begin their education at a community college or transfer students (about half of all community college students).

Additionally, it is rare to find connections between community college databases and those of other agencies that may also be serving the same students, such as adult basic education, workforce development, and others. This is a problem not only because it hinders our ability to track student progress, but also because it prevents us from learning about what types of programs work to help students persist and graduate.

We need improved data systems and analysis to determine what's working, create a culture of continuous improvement, and provide better consumer information. This requires robust data systems that track student outcomes over time, across education and training sectors and into the labor market.

Some states are leveraging the federal State Longitudinal Data Systems efforts to get better intelligence on all students, including adult basic education students. Other states, such as Washington and Ohio, have established educational performance measures to track student progression from pre-college through graduation (some states even link college funding to performance on these measures).

4) Financial aid for low-income working adults

State and federal financial aid for low-income adults and disadvantaged youth is paltry compared to their need. Even with recent increases in the Pell grant, its inflation-adjusted value has eroded significantly over time and now covers only a small portion of college costs. Even with student loans, financial aid packages often leave low-income students without enough funds to pay for all the costs of college which include not just tuition and fees but also housing, child care, transportation, and other living expenses. But most importantly, federal and state student aid programs are typically designed for traditional students and often provide little assistance to adult, part-time, and working students.

We need more and better student financial aid that helps low-income students, who often attend college while they are working, access education and persist long enough to attain a postsecondary credential. This includes developing new types of student financial aid in higher education and Work Study opportunities designed specifically to support low-income adults and disadvantaged youth.

Many states have designed new aid programs or adapted existing aid programs to better serve adult students, including Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Washington, and West Virginia. With current federal and state budget pressures, it is essential to adopt policies that encourage leveraging and coordinating student financing from many sources – such as federal and state student financial aid, the Workforce Investment Act, Trade Adjustment Assistance, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and employers. Examples of states effectively doing this include, but are not limited to, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Oregon.

5) Increased student support services

Low-income adult students and youth struggle to access and persist in community college programs because they lack adequate life, work, and academic supports. There is no systemic public funding for these services at either the federal or state level. Institutions often cobble together these services—typically in partnership with community-based organizations—however the need vastly outstrips available resources.

We need more resources and more creative partnerships to provide significantly more student support services that enable vulnerable students to persevere in education and training programs. Specifically, students need more and better academic student support services, including tutoring, study skills seminars, and learning communities; personal student support services such as child care, transportation, access to personal counseling, and emergency funds to assist students with minor crises before they become major derailments to their education and training; and college and career exploration and advising opportunities, including college orientation and success courses, that help students navigate college and explore career options.

On the federal level, Student Success Grants that help at-risk students stay in college and complete courses, were included in the last reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, and should be fully funded. Promising examples from the states include the Washington Opportunity Grant program, and the California Educational Opportunity Program and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education. Community colleges providing these services include Northern Virginia Community College, Portland Community College (OR), Southeast Arkansas College, Community College of Denver (CO), LaGuardia Community College (NY), and Central New Mexico Community College, among others.