DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 705 JC 030 130

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TITLE	Best in Class: Community Colleges Could Take Notes from the Nation's Top Schools.
INSTITUTION	Jobs for the Future, Boston, MA.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.jff.org/jff/PDFDocuments/BestInClass.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Opinion Papers (120)
JOURNAL CIT	CommonWealth; v7 n4 p19-24 Sum 2002
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Education; Awards; Community Colleges; *Educationally Disadvantaged; First Generation College Students; Job Skills; *Minority Groups; *Nontraditional Students; *Student Characteristics; *Two Year College Students; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	*Massachusetts; Sinclair Community College OH; West Hills Community College CA

ABSTRACT

MetLife Foundation created a national awards program to identify and reward community colleges that are best promoting educational and economic advancement of underserved youth and adults. Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping young people and adults gain skills needed to succeed in a changing world, managed this effort for the foundation. The six finalists and the two award recipients reflect the wide range of American community colleges. West Hills Community College (WHCC) in California's San Joaquin Valley is a small school in a largely Hispanic rural area. At WHCC, recruiting from the area's Hispanic population is the highest priority. Advisors and counselors go out into the community; Hispanic enrollment has increased from 17% to 48% since new leadership took over 8 years ago. Sinclair Community College (SCC) in Dayton, Ohio, is large and urban, with significant concentrations of poor Appalachian whites and African Americans in its classrooms. SCC targets zip codes with high percentages of African Americans and Appalachian residents for outreach. The author describes some innovations in Massachusetts community colleges, but argues that they are the exception in that state rather than the rule. Massachusetts has low state support for community colleges, resulting in tuition that is among the highest in the nation, which in turn depresses enrollment. (Author/NB)

Best in class

Community colleges could take notes from the nation's top schools

BY RICHARD KAZIS

Across the country, community colleges are the fastest growing segment of public higher education. Close to half of all collegegoers now start their freshman year at a community college. In Massachusetts, community college enrollments rose almost 20 percent between 1997 and 2001; at Middlesex Community College, enrollments were at record levels in 2001-02, up 15 percent from the previous year. More students are now enrolled in the state's community colleges than at the five campuses of the University of Massachusetts.

With 1.6 million more 18-to-24-year-olds expected to enroll in higher education nationally during the next decade, as the children of the baby boomers reach college age, the growth is far from over. And community colleges are well positioned to capture a significant segment of this booming market. They appeal to people with a broad range of education and training needs: high school graduates wanting to stay close to home; adult workers seeking to advance their careers; high school dropouts and others with serious learning challenges; "experimenters" trying to figure out their next educational move. Low cost, easy access, and relative flexibility in schedules are attractive to many prospective students, particularly those in their family's first generation to attend college. Attractive as well is the payoff for community-college credentials—average annual income gains of 20 percent to 30 percent over a high school diploma.

These institutions have a difficult assignment.

The traditional academic program, which leads to an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year school, is still at the heart of most community colleges. Over the years, though, other missions have become increasingly important. One is remedial education for students inadequately prepared for higher education. In most community colleges, well over half of incoming students require at least one basic skills course before they can take credit-level courses. Non-credit continuing education divisions have also expanded dramatically in response to employers' and residents' demand for work force training programs and personal enrichment courses. There are easily as many people taking non-credit classes at community colleges in a year as there are students enrolled in degree or occupational-certificate programs.

The multiple missions of community colleges make them uniquely flexible institutions, ones that have great potential for providing the education low-income and less-skilled Americans need to advance and succeed in today's economy. Norton Grubb, a higher-education expert at the University of California at Berkeley, argues that community colleges have advantages over both specialized second chance programs, such as stand-alone GED and adult basic education programs, and four-year colleges and universities. Because they are comprehensive institutions, community colleges provide a bridge from short-term training to mainstream education. They can mix academic, vocational, and remedial skill development in ways that allow working people to progress rapidly toward credentials that have value in the labor market. They are more likely than four-year colleges to be responsive to the needs of local employers and to changes in the labor market dynamics—and to be affordable for low-income students. While they often demonstrate the entrepreneurial instincts of a training agency, says Grubb, community colleges ultimately "belong to the culture of education rather than training."

Unfortunately, these multiple missions can also undercut efforts to lead the institution in a single direction. Academic faculty may resist collaboration with continuing education instructors who lack advanced teaching credentials. Remedial educators may balk at integrating basic-skills studies with occupational training. Out of financial considerations, a college may be more tempted to reach out to 18-to-20-year-olds and make less of an effort to engage older working adults, who need more support and whose part-time status can mean higher costs to the institution.

Even with a clear sense of mission, however, these institutions are faced with a difficult assignment. Community

colleges attract a student body of first-time collegegoers who have often been poor performers in traditional educational settings. They attract many youth and adults who are not entering directly from high school, who are already working and may already have started a family. Their students have greater needs than the typical four-year college student, ranging from day care and transportation to academic support—not to mention earning a living. Non-completion rates at community colleges are high. Minority, immigrant, and low-income students have the greatest difficulty climbing the steps of the educational ladder to earn an associate's degree.

Not surprisingly, some community colleges are meeting these challenges better than others. Last year, MetLife Foundation created a national awards program to identify and reward colleges that are doing the best in promoting educational and economic advancement for underserved youth and adults. Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping young people and adults gain skills needed to succeed in a changing world, managed this effort for the foundation. This assignment gave us the opportunity to scan the country for innovative community colleges.

The six finalists—chosen by a committee of experts—and the two award recipients, in particular, reflect the wide range of community colleges. West Hills Community College in California's San Joaquin Valley is a small school in a largely Hispanic rural area. Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, is large and urban, with significant concentrations of poor Appalachian whites and African-Americans in its classrooms. The other finalists—Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, NC; the Community College of Vermont; Portland Community College in Oregon; and San Jacinto College North outside of Houston—represent equally diverse and disparate communities.

As we surveyed current practice, we also saw a range of innovative programs. That is not really surprising. Community colleges are by necessity entrepreneurial institutions, always looking for new sources of revenue and enrollments. But in the best of these entry-level collegiate institutions, we saw some overarching trends as well. The community colleges that stand out from their peers nationwide are making a conscious, deliberate, institution-wide commitment to helping harder-to-serve populations succeed in post-secondary education. To do so, these schools are revamping the way they reach out to potential students, beefing up supports and services that students receive

once they are at the college, and strengthening the linkages they provide to employment and further education.

And these efforts are bearing fruit. In these community colleges, more youth and adults are entering college who would otherwise never have made the leap to higher education. More students are going further in their education and earning credentials that matter in life and career. From these six MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Award-winners and finalists, there are lessons to be learned by community colleges across the country—including those here in Massachusetts. These lessons for community-college success in improving access and achievement for needy populations can be found in three key areas:

OUTREACH TO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS: For many young people and adults who seek college credentials, post-secondary education is a daunting prospect. Many are the first collegegoers in their families. Numerous obstacles stand in their way: cost, lack of information about options, fear of the unfamiliar, past failure in school, and time constraints imposed by work and family responsibilities. For these prospective students, it's easier not to go to college than to take the plunge. To serve prospects like these, community colleges have to go to them—and offer them a college experience that's inviting and supportive.

Getting the prospects to enroll is only a first step.

For West Hills Community College, recruiting from the area's Hispanic population is the highest priority. Offering van service to its three campuses and high quality, on-campus child care centers, West Hills has doubled its enrollment in the past six years, reversing a trend of declining registration. Says dean of students Bertha Felix-Mata, "Every week, our advisors and counselors go out and introduce ourselves in the community: 'I'm so and so and I'm here to help your children...and once they come to the college, we're going to set them up for the next step.'" As a result of this outreach, Hispanic registration has climbed from 17 percent of enrollment to 48 percent since new leadership took over eight years ago.

Sinclair Community College targets zip codes with high percentages of African-American and Appalachian residents for outreach. The effort has paid off in rising enrollments from these high-need communities. The number of students applying for financial aid increased by 23 percent for the 2001-2002 school year and the proportion of first-generation college-goers rose from 23 to 31 percent of enrollments.

Taking another tack, San Jacinto College North has concentrated on not letting its prospects get away. Realizing that many new students were applying for admission but then failing to enroll, the college simplified enrollment procedures and put staff to work helping new students complete the paperwork. Enrollments climbed from 77 to 91 percent of those admitted.

SUPPORTS TO INCREASE RETENTION: Getting prospects enrolled in college is only a first step. Most community colleges have a tough time seeing students through to completion of programs that give them useful educational or vocational credentials. As many as half the students who start degree programs in community college have not yet graduated after five years.

"Keeping students [enrolled] requires focusing in a comprehensive way not just on access, but on three other opportunities to make the colleges more student-centered and student-friendly: curriculum design and delivery, student services and supports, and remediation," says Nan Poppe, dean of adult and continuing education at Portland Community College.

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. and the National Governors Association recently surveyed promising community college strategies to improve retention of low-income students. Foremost among these are on-site child care, particularly on nights and weekends, student support centers that provide peer and professional tutoring and counseling, and redesign of programs to speed students toward credentials and jobs.

Important as well are efforts to ease the transition to college work, and to accommodate student needs in the classroom. Central Piedmont Community College runs a formal orientation program for all new students and offers a free freshman course on time management and study habits. First-time, transfer, and nursing students are required to take the course, which serves 500 first-year students per semester. San Jacinto College North gives training to full-time and adjunct faculty members on variation in learning styles and strategies for integrating remedial education into academic and occupational programs.

PATHWAYS TO ADVANCEMENT: People who enroll in community college programs arrive with very different levels of basic skills, English proficiency, past academic performance, and work experience. Many low-income youth and adults who turn to the community college for help are inadequately prepared, academically and in other ways, to succeed in programs of study that lead to a career out of poverty. Yet they are typically unable to afford the time and the cost of remedial education before they even begin a two-year degree program in an occupa-

tional or academic area.

Portland Community College has spent five years developing its approach to helping at-risk youth with varying skill levels succeed in the mainstream college program. When young people come to the college, they are steered into one of three distinct pathways: a program for non-native English-speaking high school dropouts; a GED program for individuals who lack a high school diploma; or a one-term program for students with at least an eighth-grade reading level, which concentrates on preparing them academically and socially for college coursework. The goal of all these programs is to move students as quickly as possible into college credit courses, rather than putting them through a long sequence of ESL or remedial courses beforehand. Students who complete their GED receive nine college credits and are eligible for a free semester of college courses if they stay on. Students in the one-semester program move immediately into the mainstream of the college, pursuing courses in one of 41 career pathways that are aligned with both state education standards and the college's departmental requirements. They earn their high school diploma along the way. Indeed, PCC is the largest single grantor of high school diplomas in the city, issuing over 2,000 a year. More importantly, a significant proportion of the college's successful new students are youth who would otherwise never have persevered and succeeded in post-secondary career programs.

Whereas Portland Community College stands out in its programs for youth, Sinclair Community College is a leader in making occupational certificate and degree programs more accessible to working adults. Starting with a welfare-to-work program called Access to Better Jobs, Sinclair has broken up traditional courses of study into modules that help students develop skills that are valuable to employers more quickly. Access to Better Jobs provides short-term workforce training to the unemployed and working poor, with eligibility limited to those with income below 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines. The initial emphasis is on short-term credit and non-credit training that leads directly to jobs. The program gives part-time students, who are not eligible for federal student aid, financial assistance to pay for tuition and other work- and education-related costs. Once participants are employed, the program shifts focus to helping students who are not eligible for federal Pell Grants apply for other financial aid and continue working toward an associate's or bachelor's degree.

Today, Sinclair offers 31 competency-based, short-term certificate programs that are more responsive to the time constraints of adults balancing work, family, and education than traditional two-year programs of study. Courses are held in 20 separate locations served by the regional transit system, with classes on nights and weekends to make them convenient for working adults and single parents.

The six institutions honored by MetLife Foundation are not the only community colleges around the country that are meeting the challenge of serving a wide range of student needs. But they do set a standard for addressing the issues of access, retention, and advancement—issues that are critical for students who might otherwise never attempt, let alone succeed in, higher education.

So how does Massachusetts measure up against this standard? Among the bright spots:

ACCESS AND RECRUITMENT: Berkshire Community College is drawing in adult learners who need some remedial preparation by joining up with local adult basic-education providers to provide a free semester of developmental courses and computer classes. Holyoke and Northern Essex community colleges are partnering this fall with the Commonwealth Corp.'s Center for Youth Development and Education to enroll 30 seniors from local high schools who have failed the MCAS repeatedly. This program will prepare these students to pass the state exam and enable them to take three credit courses toward a post-secondary credential. "The colleges see resource opportunities" in these arrangements, says director Ephraim Weisstein. "Longer term, though, they see a way to improve their feeder system from local high schools, something that hasn't always been easy for them."

SUPPORT AND RETENTION: Springfield Technical Community College has raised retention rates by 5 percent thanks to its Student Success Center, according to president Andrew Scibelli. The center, which is packed all day, provides academic support, including counseling, tutoring, and self-paced computer-based skills programs. STCC has also been a leader in making courses available on the Internet, which has made it easier for people balancing work, family, and school to fit college courses into their lives. "This has been far more popular that we had anticipated, particularly for people with children," says Scibelli. "We are not getting a lot of new students, but students already enrolled are taking two [courses] instead of one, or three instead of two. They will be able to get through faster."

PATHWAYS TO ADVANCEMENT: Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester has altered the course sequence in some of its degree programs to enable students to obtain marketable entry-level skills, such as command of computer software applications, sooner (in their first 12 to 15 credits) rather than later. According to

vice president of academic affairs Cathy Livingston, this adjustment helps working adults become more employable more quickly. Besides giving them a shot at a better job in the short term, she says, this immediate taste of success can be an incentive to stay enrolled longer and to work harder to earn a credential. Middlesex Community College is working with Fitchburg State College and the Lowell public schools to create a credential program for school paraprofessionals to help meet the needs of the many English language learners in Lowell classrooms. And seven community colleges around the state are participating in a "career ladders" initiative, funded by the Legislature, to improve the skills of workers, and therefore the quality of care, in Massachusetts nursing homes.

These are exciting and important innovations, but they are exceptions to the rule in Massachusetts. These programs tend to be small, isolated from the institutions' bread-and-butter sources of enrollment and revenue and launched with outside resources. They require external partnerships that are often not easy for colleges to form. Moreover, in launching new ventures, the colleges are fighting uphill against serious obstacles at the state level to committing the significant new resources it would take to improve education and employment outcomes for hard-to-serve groups.

Few industrial states invest as little in their community college systems as does Massachusetts. Low state support for community colleges results in tuition that is among the highest in the nation, which in turn depresses enrollment. The Legislature has also been erratic in its funding of higher education, causing Board of Higher Education chairman Stephen Tocco to liken state funding to a "roller coaster." Funding for community college scholarships has been cut for two years in a row. The Community College Workforce Training Incentive Program, which provides community colleges with financial incentives to increase the number of training contracts with local businesses, has been reduced from $2.5 million to $900,000, and the set-aside of adult basic education funds for community colleges all but eliminated, shutting off key sources of funding for innovation. Rigid welfare work requirements in Massachusetts have made it much harder for the state's colleges to serve recipients of cash assistance, an important niche for them prior to 1996. State funding for dual enrollment of high school students in community colleges was cut from $1.8 million in fiscal year 2001 to $350,000 in 2002, and provisions targeting a portion of these funds to alternative educational institutions for at-risk youth were eliminated.

More, and more consistent, funding would help, particularly for programs that target access, retention, and

advancement of harder-to-serve populations. Equally important, though, would be revising state policies and procedures that pose obstacles to institution-wide innovations like those pursued by MetLife Foundation honorees.

Such an overhaul would start with funding rules that hamstring innovation and discourage entrepreneurship on campus—rules that the state board of higher education wants to revamp. "Right now, the system just doesn't make any sense," says Chancellor Judith Gill. "The state sets tuition levels, and those dollars come back to the state. Each institution sets their fee structure, and those revenues stay with the schools. The state puts no money into continuing education and non-credit programs even though they are so important to working adults. We're going to take a hard look at the whole crazy system."

The state should also look at policies and practices that reinforce inertia and fragmentation within community colleges. The bureaucratic separation of GED and adult basic education from community college degree programs makes it hard to create clear pathways to college credentials for many who face multiple barriers. State laws and collective bargaining agreements treat those who teach in the day program differently from those who teach the same courses at night or in the continuing education division, making it difficult to integrate credit and non-credit study.

The pressure to change could come from the state, tying a commitment of additional resources to greater accountability for results, as was done in the past decade with K-12 education. "The state doesn't ask us to be accountable for anything," admits one administrator. "Perhaps the best thing it could do would be to engage the system and its leaders in serious dialogue about vision, results, and focus."

Or it could bubble up from the campuses. Some community college leaders, says Cathy Livingston of Quinsigamond Community College, "still think of their institutions as the college on the hill and haven't thought hard about how to reach out to the different kinds of students coming to us now." But others have chosen to embrace the new, if challenging, market that's waiting to be served —and willing to buck the status quo on their own campuses to do so.

"Despite the poor funding pattern, and the significant odds against the colleges, Massachusetts has a number of very scrappy presidents and colleges," notes Katherine Boswell, director of the Center for Community College Policy at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States. If the Commonwealth's community colleges want recognition as national leaders in flexible, accessible postsecondary education, they'll need to be scrappy. ■

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