



Implementing Policy Options to Strengthen the Nexus between Postsecondary Education and Workforce Development

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In December, the Commission adopted the last in its initial series of reports on the nexus between postsecondary education and workforce development. The first three reports looked at the landscape of the issue: a description of the historical context; a review of employer concerns that California's postsecondary systems are not producing enough graduates with the skills needed to compete in the economy; and a report on the current status of workforce programs and initiatives in the state's public and private colleges and universities. The fourth and final paper in the series summarized the conclusions that could be drawn from the research. It also outlined a number of potential policy options that might be pursued to strengthen the nexus between the needs of the workforce and California postsecondary education. The Commission indicated its agreement with the policy options presented and adopted the report; it requested staff to return with plans and priorities to pursue implementation of those options.

The ten policy options recommended are general. This paper groups them into three categories, and describes where we believe they could fit into an implementation effort. One option is quite timely and staff is already pursuing it actively. Several options may be relatively low on the state's policy "radar screen," but provide excellent opportunities for Commission initiatives over the coming months. Finally, about half of the recommended policy options are now being pursued by postsecondary education stakeholders and others in the state; these should be monitored and supported rather than prioritized for immediate Commission action, especially in light of limited resources.

Immediate Priority Item

The policy option on which Commission Executive Director Murray Haberman and staff have already moved forward is pursuing the improved state-level collaboration toward which AB 365 was targeted. That legislation, carried by Assemblymember Anthony Portantino in 2007, proposed that the Commission and the state Labor and Workforce Development Agency convene a task force to identify measures of postsecondary contributions to workforce development. It was hoped this discussion would bring postsecondary education and workforce development stakeholders into dialogue with positive effects that would extend beyond the work of the task force. Although AB 365 was overwhelmingly supported in the legislature, it was vetoed by the Governor, who indicated that he supported the goal but did not feel it necessary to establish a task force by statute to achieve it.

In late January 2008, Commission staff met with Labor and Workforce Development Agency Secretary Victoria Bradshaw and Undersecretary Douglas Hoffner. Staff proposed that the Secretary and Executive Director Haberman jointly sign a letter inviting stakeholders identified in AB 365 to begin the discussion. We proposed that Commission staff be assigned to support this task force, and requested the Agency to share in this effort. Secretary Bradshaw was open to the idea, and suggested that Secretary of Education David Long should also be a partner. It was envisioned that the California Workforce Board, which has already commenced statewide outreach and collaborative efforts, would play a role in implementation, as we do not want to recreate work that is being done elsewhere. At Secretary Bradshaw's request, Commission staff provided a brief synopsis of what we hoped to accomplish through such an effort, and also provided a draft letter over the signatures of Secretary Bradshaw, Director Haberman, and Secretary Long. As of early March 2008, no further response has been received from the Agency.

Other Opportunities for Commission Leadership

Several other policy options on the list presented in December offer opportunities for Commission leadership, although they are not currently high on the state's policy agenda. All of them would require significant staff commitment to advance, but they are important priorities that justify targeted efforts. To address these options, the Commission staff is exploring a partnership with the new Workforce Development Advocacy Masters' program at CSU Sacramento. The program requires each year's student cohort to complete a year-long collaborative project that supports workforce development. In early April, we will invite this group to select one of these options as their 2008 project. If this approach proves to be unproductive, staff will consider other strategies to move forward on one or more of these options in the near term.

The policy options in this category include, in priority order:

- **Compile and disseminate “Best Practices”.** As indicated in the policy options report, a large number of regional and statewide initiatives and partnerships between postsecondary education and stakeholders in workforce development are working closely together and are achieving results. What is lacking is an easily-accessible inventory of these activities, a set of criteria for what constitutes success in such partnerships, and information on how those that are successful can be replicated in other economic sectors or areas of the state. It would be very useful for the Commission to compile this information, but it would take a significant amount of staff time.
- **Align system and campus research and planning.** The December workforce report noted that, while workforce development is clearly an important part of the missions of all of the postsecondary systems, the implementation of that goal is not necessarily supported by the planning and administrative structures in the systems — especially in the University of California and the California State University. Engaging UC and CSU fully in a state-level collaborative discussion could help focus the issues, identify changes in planning and administration that would sharpen the focus on their workforce roles, and support improved alignment within the systems. This is an issue for ongoing discussion and should continue to be on the agendas of the systems and the Commission.
- **Increase focus on career development.** Continuing discussion of these issues in various venues provide more and more evidence — at least anecdotal evidence — that career development, career guidance, and career planning are under-prioritized in K-12 and postsecondary education in California. To change that situation will require additional resources and increased awareness by educators at all levels, not only of the need for career development, guidance, and planning, but of the many tools and resources that exist and might be provided more effectively to more students. This topic requires extensive research and the establishment of a dialogue with the counseling and guidance communities, especially those who are experts in career counseling and guidance, to develop a plan. Such a plan is one that many college students will argue should be a very high priority.
- **Better articulate the role of postsecondary general education.** Postsecondary systems argue that “general education” — the liberal arts courses that make up lower division requirements for most or all students and that also undergird many degree programs—are essential for developing skills that employers need, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. Yet, there is a perception that these courses, while valuable intellectually, have little “real-world” connection. The concern over the value of liberal arts education to workforce development has generated efforts in California and elsewhere to consider how the benefits of a liberal arts curriculum, including its workforce benefits, might be better evaluated and demonstrated. For instance, CSU is currently participating in the Voluntary System of Accountability and the Collegiate Learning Assessment and is also involved in a national initiative called “Liberal Education and America’s Promise” (LEAP).

The Commission should research just how these and other efforts are being pursued in California, what results they are producing, and what additional state-level efforts might support constructive approaches to strengthening the role of general education in workforce development. Based on its findings, the Commission can promote dialogue on the contribution of general education and liberal arts courses to vital workforce skills, and can explore indicators to measure the direct contribution of these courses to the workforce readiness of students.

Policy Options being Pursued by Other Organizations

About half of the policy options identified in the December report are already on the agenda of other state agencies and interest groups, including postsecondary and K-12 education and the workforce development community. These options will be explored and action likely will be pursued whether the Commission is involved. Nevertheless, the Commission should monitor these efforts, provide reports to the public, and lend its voice and support, especially with regard to the first item that follows. These options include:

- **Improve and link data.** The state has had a rocky history of establishing a comprehensive system of longitudinal enrollment data for its education systems. In contrast to the unidentified, aggregated data traditionally available from the education systems, identified longitudinal data can be used to study how individual students progress through the systems.

Some progress has been made in the K-12 system, although it will be several years before all schools in the state fully participate. Costs continue to be a factor. The Commission has longitudinal data from the three public postsecondary systems, but has only aggregated data from independent colleges.

The Employment Development Department (EDD) has identified wage and salary data collected as part of the employment security system. If these data were available to the Commission, it would be possible to examine how the degrees and other awards from the postsecondary systems affect earnings and employment patterns as students move into the workforce. A recommendation that the Commission be designated the agency to manage a system linking education and employment data requires the legal authority for EDD to provide the Commission with the employment security wage and salary file. The Commission has the capacity to manage the process, store the data and link the wage data to its existing longitudinal data system.

In the short term, the Commission already plays a role in assessing the linkage between workforce needs and degree production through STEPS — the School to Employment Pathways System, accessible on the Commission’s website at www.cpec.ca.gov/Accountability/Steps.asp.

STEPS is a valuable tool that links the Commission’s degree data with EDD’s occupational projections. It can assist prospective students in identifying majors that lead to desired occupations and occupations to which specific degrees may lead. The Commission can broaden this analysis to examine the more typical situation where several different degree disciplines can prepare students for several different occupations. Better understanding the interaction of degree programs and occupational needs can serve both individual and institutional planning needs, and is an area in which the Commission should continue to provide research and analysis.

- **Encourage regional strategies.** It is apparent that considerable activity is already taking place at the regional level in every educational arena — K-12 and postsecondary. The Labor and Workforce Development Agency is also promoting a regional approach to economic and workforce development. The Agency’s Regional Economies Project has developed economic and workforce projections for the state’s economic regions and works with other partners to share the information widely

to inform both policy and planning by the public and private sectors. The Commission should build closer ties to this project and identify ways to better inform the postsecondary education institutions about it. It should also seek to link efforts to promote state-level collaboration with these and other regionally-focused efforts.

- **Improve alignment with K-12 education.** The importance of this has become central to discussions of improving K-12 education in general, and to assuring that K-12 schools prepare students for success in both postsecondary education and the workplace. All three of the public postsecondary systems are engaged in a number of initiatives designed to strengthen this alignment. Recently, Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell announced that the Governor, the public education systems, private colleges, business leaders, and career technical education stakeholders had agreed to join the American Diploma Project, a national initiative aimed at better aligning curriculum to give students the skills they need for both higher education and work. The Commission should monitor the progress of these efforts and identify future opportunities to contribute expertise and support as appropriate.
- **Strengthen career technical education.** In recent years, with the support of both the Governor and the Superintendent of Public Instruction, there has been heightened focus on restoring Career Technical Education (CTE) to an appropriate role in both K-12 and postsecondary institutions. The State Board of Education has adopted CTE standards and has launched work on a curriculum framework. The Board of Education and the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges both adopted a new CTE State Plan in March 2008. This plan offers a vision larger than simply distributing limited federal categorical funds. State funding has been substantially increased for joint high school and community college programs, and more dollars are promised for the future, unless funding is derailed by the current state budget crisis. While the extent and sustainability of the state's new focus on the value of CTE remain unclear, the employer community strongly supports its revitalization. Commission staff has also been involved in these discussions, and will continue to participate in the future and recommend action where needed.
- **Secure adequate resources.** This is an activity in which every segment of education has been actively engaged for many years. This will be even more urgent in light of California's deepening budget crisis. The discussion is complex, covering many aspects of funding public needs. It is unlikely in the immediate future that expanded initiatives requiring additional state funding will be supported for any of the systems. The priority will be to protect what already exists to the extent possible. In the short term, the Commission should continue to make recommendations on the state budget and legislation consistent with its policy direction to support workforce development as a prime function of public higher education. In the longer term, the Commission should explore new initiatives and additional funding in the context of expanded state-level collaboration and discussion of all higher education needs in the budget.

Conclusion

Given the Commission's size, level of funding and competing policy priorities, progress on these policy options must be achieved incrementally. Nonetheless, progress is possible. The research conducted by the Commission over the past two years coupled with a rising chorus of concern in the state and nation about the future of the workforce, support the need for continued effort by the Commission in this area. In the immediate future, staff will focus on collaboration with the Labor and Workforce Development Agency to encourage discussion that brings all the postsecondary systems into alignment with the workforce needs of the state. Staff will also pursue collaboration with CSU Sacramento on developing policy leadership in this field. In future meetings, we will report on outcomes of those efforts and recommend additional steps to implement identified policy objectives.