

Community Colleges Mean Business ...

But What Does Business Mean?

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New England faces a complicated set of problems. Over the next decade, the region will see: shrinking tax revenues to support state and local governments because of an unfavorable business climate; increasing disparity between the skills of workers entering the labor market and those possessed by an experienced yet aging workforce; an influx of younger immigrant workers, many with language barriers, who are not ready for even entry-level jobs; and a relatively high cost of living that will make it difficult to attract and retain the educated workforce needed to replace workers who retire.

It is imperative for businesses to find a reliable and prepared labor force. This was easier when all a worker needed most was a strong back or basic skills that could be learned on the job. But those qualities no longer cut it in New England or anywhere else in the United States. As a result, businesses are spending as much as \$23 billion a year to train their employees, according to IDS, the Framingham, Mass.-based consulting firm.

Community colleges have believed from their inception that, given the opportunity, they could offer the solution to business's labor-supply problems. In some states, including Connecticut, in fact, it is the statutory

mission of community colleges to provide career and job preparation. Yet while community colleges have been the educators and trainers of choice in some fields—for example, preparing two-thirds of all allied health workers—they have not always been able to deliver what business needs.

One reason is that our expectations and those of business may be as far apart as planets in the solar system. While successful businesses must be cutting-edge and instantly responsive to market shifts and consumer demands, traditional educational institutions move at the pace of bureaucracy, slowed by layers of approval and oversight imposed upon curricular decisions. While businesses want to spend the least possible on indirect costs, community colleges depend, in part, upon the financial support of the businesses to which they provide education and training. While businesses want personnel to be instantly productive, the processes of education and training require time for students to acquire experiences that directly relate to classroom theory.

The business community has many options for training and educating workers. Large companies such as Motorola and McDonald's have created their own corporate universities. Proprietary schools such as DeVry, Argosy and the Education Management Corp. have carved a national niche in employment training. The University of Phoenix enrolls almost 50,000 online students. Other colleges and universities also run networks of training programs specifically designed to

meet the needs of businesses and provide continuing education for workers. So despite their public mandate, lower costs and ubiquitous availability, community colleges face a lot of competition.

If New England community and technical colleges are going to be of greater service to business and industry, then we want a few things from the business community. First, we want employers to invest in *all* their employees. At the most basic level, employers should commit to the idea that every one of their employees must be literate not only in the traditional sense, but also computer-literate and familiar with the role of technology in the workplace. Recent literacy studies show that nearly one quarter of U.S. adults are functionally illiterate. Businesses have a responsibility to make sure that their employees do not fall into this category. Workers with marginal literacy levels and no technical skills are disproportionately disadvantaged if they become unemployed in an economic recession. Indeed, virtually every time a manufacturing company moves out of New England, community colleges are called upon to retrain the company's former employees to make them employable. Too often, we have to start with reading and writing.

Moreover, community college enrollment goes up when the economy is weak, which places demands on us when we are least able to meet them. We need to get over the idea that education and training are needed only in times of upheaval or economic crisis. Businesses will prosper more if they view employee education and training as a long-term priority rather than a stopgap measure to ward off financial ruin.

We also want businesses to see community colleges as partners. Internship and practicum experiences benefit both students and the businesses that employ them. Tuition reimbursement and loan-forgiveness programs encourage long-term commitments to education on the part of employers, while supporting community college students, who are often economically disadvantaged.

Finally, if businesses will work with community colleges and articulate what they are looking for in future employees, then we will be better able to produce graduates who meet those requirements, perhaps ultimately saving businesses the money they now spend on retraining, which is a significant part of the \$23 billion figure.

Business understands what it means to focus on core strengths. Wall Street is littered with the remnants of companies that tried to diversify too much and thereby diluted their base. For too long, community colleges also have diluted their base, trying to be all things to all people. It is difficult to serve the needs of business when so many of our resources are devoted to other community college missions, including the traditional mission of preparing students for transfer

to four-year colleges, the developmental mission and the community service mission. This creates a tension between our role in economic development and our desire to be seen as traditional academic institutions. It may be time to reassess our core mission and functions and make some choices about who we are and what we do best, so that we all know what to expect.

Community colleges also must recognize that whether a program is *credit* or *non-credit* means little to the world outside. We hear constantly from business leaders that they want employees to have specific skill sets as well as critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. It is educators who have insisted on attaching a degree or certificate to that body of knowledge. To serve businesses, community colleges should embrace the idea that there are myriad ways to credential learning, not all of which are tied to accumulating traditional college credit. What we now label non-credit training is often the best route to licensure in emerging technical fields, for example, and it is the license, not the college credit, that leads to employment.

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Community college leaders and business leaders often work side by side serving their communities. Yet their relationships too infrequently translate into programmatic collaborations or educational partnerships, resulting in wasted opportunity for everyone.

We may inhabit different worlds, but in the end, businesses and community colleges have much in common. We rely on our human resources to improve the quality of life for everyone. We want well-trained employees who are well-educated, and well-educated employees who are well-trained. Ultimately we can do better work together than we can do alone. Isn't that really what we want?

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