

spotlight on **POVERTY and** **OPPORTUNITY**

The untapped potential of community college career education

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As Congress debates the Higher Education Act, there's increasing focus on community college workforce education and how it can be made more productive and inclusive. Spotlight spoke recently with Opportunity America President Tamar Jacoby about two new papers she has authored on the topic: a Lumina Foundation issue paper titled "Community College Career Education: Scaling a New Approach" and an investigation of eight short-term job-focused programs titled "An Unknown Landscape: Short-Term Job-Focused College Programs." Both reports can be found [here](#). The conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Why are these institutions [community colleges] so important at this moment?

We're in a moment of economic transition. Technology is getting more sophisticated. Data are more and more important. Jobs – virtually all jobs – require greater skill and more sophistication. There's a big return to a bachelor's degree and higher – nobody's dissing BAs or graduate education. But this ratcheting up of demand for skill and sophistication is also true at the middle-skill level – for people who have more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. Just a few decades ago, a high school diploma was enough to get a good-paying job at the Ford factory. Today, you need to know how to program the computer at the manufacturing facility and manage the new robot. People need more

postsecondary education and training, and community colleges are well-positioned to provide it.

But community colleges are highly uneven in quality. Many are unsure if their mission should be getting people into four-year college or getting people into the work force. In recent years, many have focused more heavily on four-year college – and had disappointing results. More than 80 percent of students arrive at community college saying they want to transfer to a four-year, but only 15 percent make it. So, either the colleges are doing something wrong, or they’re doing the wrong thing.

Bottom line: Not everybody needs a four-year degree. There’s a growing need for other kinds of postsecondary education and training – more job-focused education. And some community colleges are stepping up to meet this need. They’re thinking more about labor market demand, they’re partnering with employers. They’re asking themselves, “Do people need an associate degree that takes two years and requires you to take what many may see as irrelevant humanities or social science courses?” This is especially important for mid-career adults who lose their jobs to robots and need to retrain. But it’s also true of many students fresh out of high school. They don’t want or need two years of gen ed courses. They want to learn the latest IT or welding or nursing and get into the workforce as soon as possible.

Aren’t there competitors in this space, such as coding bootcamps? Do you think community colleges have an advantage or not?

Community colleges’ big advantage is their reach. In 2016, 17,000 people went through coding bootcamps. Government-run job training programs trained 175,000 people. A half million were enrolled in apprenticeship programs. How many took courses at a community college? Twelve million. Community colleges have the scale and reach to do the job. They also know how to teach, they have classrooms, they often have the equipment and machinery you need for job-focused programs. And they’re taxpayer funded. The institution we have that’s taxpayer funded should be stepping up to meet this need.

They’re working more closely with employers. What are the barriers keeping community colleges from doing more of that?

It’s a relatively new concept, new meaning the last 10 years or so – this notion that you need an employer to provide effective job training. It used to be there was some guy teaching carpentry at the college. He taught the same course every year for 30 years, and no one asked if there were carpentry jobs available at the end or if he was teaching with the latest up-to-date equipment. Colleges can’t answer questions like that without employers. You can’t do job training without input from the people who know the jobs and do the hiring.

The problem is that employers and educators come from different cultures. Employers are results oriented. Educators are process oriented. Employers are in a hurry – they’re busy running their businesses. Most educators move at their own pace. And when you put employers and educators in a room, they often don’t know how to talk to each other.

It’s an issue for colleges, but there are also issues on the employer side. We’re seeing more employer engagement in education and training. You see Walmart stepping up, and AT&T and others. And some industries – industrial construction contractors and hospitals, for example – have been training for quite a while. But for many employers, it’s a new thing, and many are hesitant. Sometimes they just don’t know how. Or they don’t feel it’s their

responsibility. Or they call the college and say they want to help, and the college doesn't know how to involve them in a meaningful way. The college will invite them to lunch once or twice a year, but it's just to check a box – the faculty don't know how to ask for input and advice. We're in an era where all this is changing. It's a critical piece of the puzzle. But there are challenges on both sides.

If I'm at a community college and I'm designing a program attractive to employers, what would your advice be?

I'd start by calling my continuing education noncredit division. Most community colleges have a credit side and a noncredit side. The credit side is for students who want degrees. Noncredit programs are generally faster and more focused. You sign up for welding and take only welding. It takes 12 weeks, and then you go out and get a job. The noncredit side has its own problems. Students can't use Pell grants, and some students – understandably – want credit they can later count toward a degree. But the noncredit side can be much more responsive to employers. When an employer calls and says, "I need welders, please set up a program to train them," a noncredit administrator can launch it right away. On the credit side, it takes two years to launch a program. You need approval from the faculty and an accreditor, and by the time the program is up and running, the employer doesn't need welders anymore.

So short answer: what's my advice to colleges? Listen to what the employer needs and design a course that meets those needs – as quickly as possible.

One of your papers makes the case for expanding Pell Grants to cover short-term job training programs. What is the status of legislation on this?

Let's start with some background on Pell. Pell Grants are a needs-based scholarship program. They cost the taxpayer \$30 billion a year, and millions of students count on them to get through college. But you can't use your Pell Grant for a noncredit program shorter than a semester – and that rules out a lot of the best workforce programs. Legislation on the table in the House and the Senate, the JOBS Act, would fix this, expanding Pell Grant eligibility for shorter, job-focused programs.

What's the outlook for that?

The legislation itself is gaining traction. The problem is it's designed to be folded into reauthorization of the Higher Education Act – and HEA may or may not see the light of day this year. Sens. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Patty Murray (D-WA) are negotiating and supposedly want to pass something, but the presidential campaign is already getting in the way. So, the JOBS Act may or may not come up for a vote – we don't know.

To focus on the students, it would seem that these reforms are going to drive more student interest in these sorts of programs. Is there evidence on this?

Let's hope. One of the problems is that very little is known about these programs. The government doesn't pay for them, so it doesn't track them. We just don't know what's out there. This paper is an effort to remedy that. I visited eight programs and looked at what they teach, who the students are, what results they get. The paper is anecdotal, not data driven. But what I found was that many of these programs are meeting the needs of students and employers – so much so that students and employers are paying out of their own pockets. And many administrators told me that if they had more resources, they could expand their reach and impact. At Northern Virginia Community College, for example,

they're training 70 data techs per year, but employers in Northern Virginia are looking to hire 10,000 data techs. The college is trying to meet that labor market demand, but it's hardly even scratching the surface.

Is there a way to make the student population for these kinds of programs more diverse?

We need to increase resources and aid for students who want this kind of experience – that could help with diversity. But we also need to be careful that we don't just throw money at these programs. This shouldn't be an open spigot. We need guardrails and quality control.

Community colleges are so diverse. Some are rural, some are urban, and visiting eight of them was a great experience, whether that meant driving 200 miles in rural Iowa or getting lost in inner-city Dallas. There's a lot of exciting innovation taking place on these campuses. But we do need to be careful. We need to make sure that programs work for students – that they lead to better jobs and higher wages. What's important is the outcome, and if the taxpayer is going to pay for the program, we need to make sure we're getting good outcomes.

Tamar Jacoby is president of Opportunity America.