

September 8, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
HELP Committee
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member
HELP Committee
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Scott
Chair
Education and Labor Committee
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Ranking Member
Education and Labor Committee
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Madame Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Foxx,

We the undersigned higher education leaders and education policy thinkers write to urge you and other lawmakers working to make community college free for all Americans not to forget learners seeking job-focused education.

The Covid-19 economic shock is transforming the economy. Millions of Americans were thrown out of work by early lockdowns. Others are choosing to switch jobs, looking for new positions in new industries. The pandemic has sharply accelerated the automation and business restructuring we once called the "future of work." According to the McKinsey Global Institute, as many as 17 million Americans may need to change jobs by 2030 – one in 10 US workers and 30 percent more than anticipated before the pandemic. And together, these trends are dramatically increasing demand for fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling.

Among the institutions best positioned to provide this upskilling are the nation's 1,100 community and technical colleges. But many short, job-focused community college programs are ineligible for Title IV financial aid.

Midcareer adults whose jobs have been eliminated don't have time for a year or two of traditional academic education. They need short, targeted bursts of training that enable them to reenter the labor force as quickly as possible. Traditional college-age students have different needs, but they too are often in a hurry. Although they may return to college later in life for a full academic education, what many seek in the short term is a fast, skills-focused program that culminates in a credential with value in the labor market – a ticket to an entry-level job.

As administrators, researchers and entrepreneurs who have devoted our careers to higher education, we are encouraged by any plan designed to increase access and opportunity for students. But we are concerned that many of the college promise provisions under consideration in Washington would leave out job-focused learners and, as a result, serve only a fraction of Americans looking to higher education to enhance their opportunities for a better future.

A broader vision

Politically, our group understands, it may not be possible to fold the funding we recommend into a college promise package. What's important is that this essential support move in tandem with college promise legislation.

Our group agrees on the basic elements of what's needed:

Job-focused programs. Job-focused learners, whether college-age or older, deserve the same support as students in academic programs.

We reject the argument made by some policy thinkers that academic instruction is education, and workforce education is merely training. This false dichotomy does a disservice to all students – academically focused learners who need career exploration and workplace competencies as well as job-focused learners who need exposure to the higher-order analytical and social skills – critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork – increasingly required for all jobs, technical and nontechnical.

What’s needed from policymakers: adequate funding for both academic and job-focused education, combined with incentives for educators to work together to ensure that all learners, no matter how much time they have for college, get a well-rounded education.

Noncredit programs. Federal and state funding streams should provide for noncredit workforce programs developed in partnership with employers and aligned with the local labor market.

At many community colleges, the best job-focused programs are housed in a nondegree-granting “noncredit” division serving learners more focused on skills than academic credentials. Unlike slow-moving academic departments, unable to launch programs without approval from faculty and accreditors, the noncredit division can move quickly and agilely to respond to labor market demand, whether from learners or employers. Students in a hurry learn just the skills they need to advance on the job – no need for general education courses or electives – and often on a more convenient schedule geared to working learners.

Yet many states provide no funding for noncredit education. Only a handful fund it on a par with credit-eligible programs. And as a practical matter, noncredit learners are ineligible for federal financial aid. For those who have just lost their jobs and others in financial straits, this can be an insurmountable obstacle.

Shorter than a semester. Learners in a hurry to get a job or a better job need as much support as students with more time for education.

Not every workplace skill requires a full semester of instruction. Learners preparing for jobs in a broad range of fields – from allied health to manufacturing and cybersecurity – often need no more than eight to 10 weeks of instruction. Yet current law creates incentives for educators to stretch courses to semester length, whether or not the added instruction is needed, so that students will be eligible for federal financial aid.

What’s needed from policymakers: financial aid for learners enrolled in shorter programs that meet standards for quality and labor market relevance.

Quality assurance and accountability

The challenge for policymakers designing funding for workforce education, especially noncredit offerings: how to ensure that dollars go only to high-quality programs?

In a perfect world, all job-focused college programs, credit and noncredit, would be held accountable for graduates’ employment outcomes – job placements and wages. But this isn’t always practical in today’s world. Only some states make earnings data available to educational institutions. Many colleges collect little personal information from noncredit students. And the best noncredit programs are constantly changing in response to labor market needs, making it difficult to make meaningful use of longitudinal data.

In the meantime, as data collection and information about employment outcomes improve, we encourage policymakers to consider a variety of other benchmarks for job-focused programs, credit and noncredit.

- Do they culminate in credentials – degrees, certificates, certifications, licenses or other awards – with value in the labor market?
- Are they what educators call “stackable,” permitting noncredit students who wish to continue their education to leverage their noncredit learning for college credit?
- Do they provide learners with ample information about the local labor market – data on in-demand jobs, the return to credentials and the experience of other students who have completed similar programs – ensuring that individuals can make informed choices as they invest in higher education?
- Do they provide ample wraparound supports, including individualized advising and assistance with job-search skills, to ensure that students know how to navigate the labor market and make the most of opportunities?
- Do they provide opportunities for work-based learning – internships, apprenticeships or other hands-on job experience – that connect students with employers and enhance their employability?

Not every program will meet all these criteria, and we must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. What’s important is that institutions put priority on aligning programs with the local labor market.

We urge you and others in Congress to set your sights high. What’s needed is not just more education – more years of instruction regardless of the outcome. What Americans need is education that prepares them to live successful, satisfying lives, finding jobs in their fields of study, earning family-sustaining wages and returning to college as needed to learn new skills and stay abreast of a changing economy.

Time is of the essence as the post-pandemic economy takes off. We urge you to act quickly, positioning all Americans to take advantage of the new opportunities it’s unleashing.

Yours sincerely,

Kenneth Adams, president, LaGuardia Community College

Michael Bettersworth, vice chancellor for innovation, Texas State Technical
College

Earl Buford, president, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning

Ryan Craig, managing director, Achieve Partners

Aaron Fichtner, president, New Jersey Council of County Colleges

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Tracy Hartzler, president, Central New Mexico Community College

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Bill Pink, president, Grand Rapids Community College
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Matt Sigelman, CEO, Emsi Burning Glass
Monty Sullivan, president, Louisiana Community and Technical College System