

The Future Role of Community Colleges in Workforce Development



A Report of a National Thought Leaders' Focus Group

Maher & Maher
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I. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the individuals who took time from their busy schedules to participate in our focus group brainstorming sessions to lend their perspectives, opinions and ideas to this effort. The following individuals participated in either one or both focus groups sessions.

Debra Bragg	University of Illinois
Chris Bruhl	Fairfield County (Connecticut) Business Council
Lansing Davis	New Jersey State Workforce Investment Board
Rob Denson	Des Moines (Iowa) Area Community College
Kim Didier	Iowa Association of Business & Industry
Karen Elzey	Institute for a Competitive Workforce, U.S. Chamber of Commerce
Ken Ender	Harper College (Illinois)
Paul Jurmo	Union County (New Jersey) College
Lynn Lucas	New Jersey Juvenile Justice System
Linda Milstein	Brookdale Community College (New Jersey)
Marie Lucier-Woodruff	Brookdale Community College (New Jersey)
Richard Perniciaro	Atlantic Cape (New Jersey) Community College
Paula Pitcher	Atlantic Cape (New Jersey) Community College
Brenda Santiago	Independent Consultant (Puerto Rico)
Marisa Slaten	New Jersey Attorney General's Office
Mary Sue Vickers	American Association of Community Colleges
Kathy Weaver	Newark New Jersey WIRED Alliance
Robin Widing	New Jersey State Workforce Investment Board

II. CONTEXT

The education and training offered by the nation's community colleges has always been a key element of the broader workforce development system. With the new Administration's emerging emphasis on the potential value of community colleges in nurturing a flexible, educated, globally competitive workforce, there is a national need for community colleges to review and adjust their workforce development organizations and activities to meet the needs of a dramatically altered market reality, and to align to new opportunities and policy guidance as it emerges from Washington.

In order to contribute to this review, Maher & Maher decided to seek the perspective, combined knowledge and vision of a wide array of thought leaders, practitioners and influencers within the community college, workforce development and employer communities, to:

- Develop a "future vision" for the next generation of community colleges, to illustrate how these institutions might best support a new and developing market need; and,
- Begin to conceptualize a series of a "world-class practices" for community colleges' workforce development function to help forward-thinking institutions benchmark their activities against that future vision.

To this end, Maher & Maher organized, sponsored and facilitated two focus group sessions in September 2009. The focus group developed their vision, and moved to explore possible best practice activities within a framework of **"access, alignment and accountability."**

This framework seeks to improve access to services for potential students, seeks to better align colleges with community and regional partners, and introduces a strong emphasis on accountability – both for performance and for efficient use of available resources.

While we expect the Thought Leaders' work to benefit our own practice in the community college system focused on innovation in strategic planning, workforce development and curriculum design, our intention and hope is that open-source output discussed here will help inform discussions at the national and community levels among both policy makers and practitioners that will advance the move for enhanced innovation and expanded capacity.

III. PROCESS and ORGANIZATION

When considering potential participants, we wanted to engage people who work day-to-day with the students, workers, institutions and issues that impact communities and regions throughout the country, and who understand how government policy and the rapidly changing economic environment impact community colleges today. Most importantly, we wanted thought leaders who recognize problems and challenges and try to solve them, and who fully acknowledge the need to work collaboratively to solve the most pressing issues facing America's community colleges.

We therefore targeted those who we identified as leaders and outstanding practitioners through our broad workforce development and education practice, and who represented a wide spectrum of community college stakeholders. In that context, we recruited community college personnel from the level of President down to individuals who operate workforce programs for those institutions, and also representatives from the following communities:

- National community college organizations
- Economic development
- Workforce development
- Business
- Universities
- Government

We consciously refrained from inviting high-level government officials because we were not seeking policy statements or expanded funding opportunities, and were also keen to encourage an open-source, dialogue-based exchange focused on stimulating and gathering practitioner thinking and input.. While additional stakeholder groups could surely have been included, we feel the group suffered only from the absence of K-12 educators, one end of the educational spectrum that community colleges seek to bridge.

Two one-hour virtual focus groups were facilitated by Rick Maher. The group first engaged in a process designed to envision the 21st century community college's role in workforce development. Following that, this cross-section of stakeholders further defined the vision by brainstorming emerging best practices that community colleges can use to deliver on the vision.

All of our discussions were driven by the **Access-Alignment-Accountability** framework we utilized¹ and defined as follows:

¹ Many thanks to Dr. Ken Ender for contributions to this framework.

- **Access** – Issues and actions related to improving learner/worker and employer customer access to community college offerings
- **Alignment** – Methods and actions to better align colleges with community partners
- **Accountability** – Issues around measuring the impact of colleges' activities on over-all community well-being

This resulted in a partial list of best practices and success indicators, as well as some tentative recommendations for action at state and/or federal levels of government.

It is important to note that, except when discussing the vision, we sought neither consent nor dissent from the group. Were the participants embarking on a long-term collaborative initiative, there may well have been objections to portions of the future vision as distilled from the first session. In this context, all agreed by affirmation that it represented an accurate sense of the group's discussion.

By design, this process utilized a rapid deployment approach. It was not designed to produce a formal output, nor did it require a great deal of word-smithing from us. The output from the group should be viewed as one would view output from a "brainstorming session" – information that is useful for driving further discussion and refinement rather than a "final" product that might be output from a formal strategic planning activity at any singular institution.

In the end, our only regret is that we could not spend additional time in sessions to further deliberate with this group, but we anticipate many other such discussions will do so and add to this dialogue.

IV. VISION, BEST PRACTICES, SUCCESS INDICATORS, and RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted earlier, our critical first step involved discussing and aligning around a collective “FutureVision” for the role of community colleges in workforce development. This vision served as the group’s articulation of a guiding, “ideal state,” and provided the basis for the development of a set of concrete “world-class practices” that could help community colleges better reflect that desired state. The consensus FutureVision emerged from the participants’ responses to the following fundamental question: ***Five years from now, how will the ideal community college think, look and act differently?***

VISION: The Future Role of Community Colleges in Workforce Development

We envision a future community college that seeks to create a more learner-centered environment by offering modular, easily-accessed curriculum using e-Learning and other delivery methods and featuring shorter, occupationally focused courses leading to an occupational credential. These offerings are integrated into the college curriculum so that the courses may also earn college credit. Our FutureVision breaks down the walls between the “credit” and the “non-credit sides” of the institution and is much more closely aligned to businesses – seeking their active involvement in defining curriculum. As importantly, the future holds the possible creation of a seamless K-20 system – better aligning curriculum through all levels, better integrating career and occupational counseling, and enhancing accessibility to services for other populations, such as ex-offenders, adult basic education students, disabled persons and older workers. Finally, in our FutureVision, Community Colleges are actively engaged in securing non-traditional sources of funding to assure sustainability.

The group moved beyond their vision to explore actions and issues to be addressed in the areas of access, alignment, and accountability. In each of these areas, thought leaders articulated specific desired characteristics and ideal practices which could move community colleges closer to their ideal vision. Highlights from this discussion are included below.

ACCESS

Three overarching themes emerged from the group concerning the need to improve access:

1. In an ideal sense, all would benefit from a blurring of the lines between high school, adult basic education, community colleges and four-year institutions.

There was a general feeling that a system that provides for multiple, yet clear, transitions, and multiple pathways to credentials (and/or advanced degrees), would engender and support the lifelong learning activities that are essential to survive and thrive in the emerging economy.

Ideas and perspectives offered in this area included the following:

- Provisions for transitions and stable funding for basic skills students are critical. Adult basic education (ABE) programs need to link with community colleges, with provision for opportunities such as participating in adult education and community college programs of study simultaneously. Such models would improve the connection between ABE programs and community colleges, and would accelerate the path to earning credentials – a critical, short-term need for many adult learners.
- More thought should be given to how to expand equity in community college access. Learners come to colleges at various “starting points,” and there need to be more flexible and responsive methods to assess their skills, skill gaps, and prior learning, and to develop more individualized learning plans. This is particularly important given that previously-acquired skills and prior learning don’t translate neatly to Carnegie units. We need to expand equity in educational access through multiple, varied assessments of individuals’ prior learning and skills if we want to increase students’ success throughout community college learning pathways.
- Additional thought needs to be given to the transitional issues that youth encounter when they are “set loose” on their own. This is particularly true for underserved and/or at-risk young learners, and for youth facing known barriers to educational success, such as language barriers or a lack of basic skills. Expanding coaching and mentoring programs for youth transitioning into the community college learning environment could greatly increase opportunities for these students’ success.

2. There is a clear need to build community colleges’ capacity in order to improve access, and this inevitably leads to challenges around the amount of funding and the manner in which funding is arrayed.

There was no general agreement as to whether existing resources are sufficient, but certainly existing resources and expertise need to be organized and distributed more logically, ideally in an open system through a network of K-20 providers, organized on a state-wide basis and supported by fiscal policy.

- Several participants noted that while resources may be sufficient, they are not sufficiently connected with or aligned to real capacity needs. This is particularly crucial at the state level. Colleges may not get additional funding to build capacity, so they may have to “own” this challenge and find new and creative ways of connecting and distributing existing resources.
- Finding qualified faculty was identified as a significant access challenge. This is both a staff shortage issue, as well as an issue around attracting staff from larger universities to come teach at smaller community colleges.
- Flexibility about the starting needs of students through better alignment of policies and funding at the federal and state levels is necessary. A variety of new and/or expanded federal investment, such as tax benefits and student loans, would help students more easily access the community college system.

3. There is a need to develop alternative learning models and increase flexibility in delivery models to meet the needs of students, workers and employers.

- In the future, there will be more education occurring at the worksite. This raises additional issues around basic education and ESL that will have to be addressed before workers can advance in the workforce, such as whether employers value the credentials being issued. Often workers have good technical skills but lack communication and other basic skills required to advance in the workforce.
- E-learning needs to be increased exponentially in the coming years, which will better position community colleges to respond flexibly and “just in time” to business-driven education and up-skilling requirements.
- The increased capacity of colleges for distance learning is key, and state regulations need to recognize that combining in-class education with distance learning at all educational levels is most effective and affords working students, in particular, optimum access. Distance learning is also especially important for adults in custody and those re-entering society. In all cases, distance learning curriculum should be aligned with industry needs.
- Community college curriculum needs to be more modular so that students can stack individual modules flexibly into a coherent curriculum, and, ultimately, a portable and recognized credential. In addition, community colleges need to identify and recognize activities and prior learning for college credit.

4. There is a need to develop alternative funding mechanisms for students.

- The federal government needs to reform the Pell grant program to expand student access to Pell grant funding for programs of study leading to relevant, industry-recognized certifications and credentials, in addition to courses of study leading to actual postsecondary degrees.

- Businesses and employers could be better engaged as advocates for community college investment reform. A more symbiotic and synergistic relationship between employers and community colleges was identified as an important aspect of helping students secure the money and skills they need to access a community college education.

ALIGNMENT

The overarching need articulated by the group was for community colleges to be more nimble and flexible – shifting more quickly as the environment and the needs of different customer groups change. Again, the need to create “one system” where education flows through from secondary (including adult education) to the four-year level, with the community college being the bridge to link pathways together, was seen as the ideal state for the future role of the community college system.

The group’s discussion of issues that would improve educational alignment centered around the following themes:

1. Alignment of K-12, Adult Education and four-year institutions

- There is a need to identify promising models of alignment throughout the full continuum of education levels. Alignment discussion typically centers on Carnegie units, and we need to find the language and models that overcome that obstacle and offer alternative options for achieving alignment.
- Articulation among levels is important, but these articulation partnerships are often difficult to achieve. As a result, some community colleges are beginning to offer four-year degrees. Participants noted that this approach may not be the ideal or only solution to the articulation challenge, and expressed interest in identifying different models. As an example, in many states, community colleges are offering parts of a four-year degree on community college campuses, which may help to pave the way for smoother articulation partnerships.
- Acceptance of previous course work at each succeeding education level, as well as lateral acceptance across particular education levels, are both key to seamless transitions for learners. However, such acceptance is not widespread. Focus group participants articulated a need to increase the identification and sharing of successful examples.

2. Alignment with Business

- In order to engender real collaboration, the business and community college cultures need to be better synched -- each needs to understand the other’s particular needs and challenges.
- A common challenge is the need to speed and flexibility in dealing with changing business needs, and community colleges’ related constraints in this area. Two examples were offered:

- Businesses know that jobs are changing, and sometimes feel that community colleges don't understand the rapid pace of that change. As an example, online learning, which is crucial if businesses are to optimize the benefits of working with colleges, should not be viewed as harming faculty so much as indicating that there is a significant new need to ensure that academic quality is preserved as new media delivery options are launched.
- Business does not always understand that constantly reacting to environmental changes and constantly shifting needs can create problems (both real and perceived) for the academic community concerned with accreditation and staff job security.

Other related ideas and perspectives expressed included:

- Colleges need to be much more business-driven and more focused on supply and demand and their role in developing the talent pipeline. More seamless and focused collaboration between employers and the community college system can support the development of demand-driven curricula and programs; in this regard, employers can also play a key role in encouraging the acceptance of course work that they deem relevant and responsive among all institutions.
- The question of portable certifications is important. Many community colleges offer certifications in any number of competency areas; however those "certifications" may or may not have been developed in collaboration with business. In addition, there is no national system of competency certification. Further, more progress must be made in terms of developing the quality of our instructors so that community college certifications can be equated to national certifications. (Participants noted that a good example of this is Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland, which presents a seamless credential experience for students.)

3. Aligning to needs of different types of students

- In an ideal system, there wouldn't be non-credit and credit courses; students would be directed more appropriately towards the courses that reflect their individual goals. The system would be more integrated and wouldn't have "credit" and "non-credit" silos and cultures within the institution.
- Many adult students are finding that they need community colleges to upgrade their skills to re-enter the job market, so community colleges need to cater more to older students who may not be familiar with how to enter the community college system. Processes such as admissions might need to be re-evaluated with these new student populations in mind. This is especially important as this population continues to increase.
- There are some examples across the country of individuals receiving college credit for their Registered Apprenticeship experiences. This model should be replicated to improve community college access for this particular potential student group.

4. Alignment of community colleges with each other: Collaboration

- Community colleges that share resources can create more impact and utility if objectives are common across the sharing institutions. Smaller colleges especially need to explore resource-sharing and strategic alignment of resources.
- Curriculum development was noted as one particularly good venue for community college collaboration.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Clear relationships and shared objectives among business, education, and workforce development are the keys to accountability, achieving sound fiscal policy and becoming even better stewards of public resources. Where a college defines its stakeholder group broadly, and truly engages them, there is a give and take of resources and accountability. Broader stakeholder involvement and engagement (such as during the strategic planning process), also tends to highlight the most critical community issues.

- Community colleges planning strategically with other community stakeholders can help to destroy silos and engender cross-accountability.
- The future role of community colleges can be powerful if they feel they are accountable to the workforce system, and vice versa, and if both systems feel the need to engage each other in decision-making.
- Funding constraints are often pushing staff to focus on the wrong accountability measures, and focus group participants noted much time is wasted jumping through accountability “hoops.”
- When colleges have funding that is more flexible, they are much more effective at promoting alignment and accessibility. Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding was noted as particularly challenging in this regard, as WIA performance measures tend to encourage quantity and speed rather than educational value and quality. The group shared hope that re-authorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) might provide an opportunity to improve the flexibility of that program in the future.

V. REFERENCE MATERIALS USED

The following reference materials bearing on the issues discussed in the sessions were offered to all participants as catalysts for our discussions. **There is no intent by Maher & Maher, or by any of the group's participants, to endorse any of these materials, their authors or sponsoring organizations.** They were simply used to inform and drive our deliberations.

Resources from Session 1 (September 18, 2009):

- Overcoming Obstacles, Optimizing Opportunities: State Policies to Increase Postsecondary Attainment for Low-Skilled Adults (Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education)
- Lifelong Learning: New Strategies for the Education of Working Adults (Center for American Progress)
- Working Learners: Educating Our Entire Workforce for Success in the 21st Century (Center for American Progress)
- Community College Focus Group Attendees Contact List
- Building a Culture of Evidence in Community Colleges: Lessons from Exemplary Institutions (Jobs for the Future)
- Flexible Learning Options for Adult Students (FutureWorks and Jobs for the Future)
- Setting Up Success in Developmental Education: How State Policy Can Help Community Colleges Improve Student Outcomes (Jobs for the Future)
- Envisioning the Future: Career Pathways as a Systemic Framework Fully Implemented in the Community College (National Council for Workforce Education)
- The Pathways to Advancement Project: How States Can Expand Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Working Adults (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices)
- Thought Leaders' Focus Group Session 1 PowerPoint Presentation (Maher & Maher)

Click here to download a zip file containing all resources:

www.mahernet.com/temp/Comm_Coll_WF_Resources.zip

Resources from Session 2 (September 25, 2009):

- Matrix of Access-Alignment-Accountability FutureVision Elements
- Thought Leaders' FutureVision Draft Statement
- Thought Leaders' Focus Group Session 2 PowerPoint Presentation (Maher & Maher)

Click here to download a zip file containing all resources:

www.mahernet.com/temp/Comm_Coll_WF_Resources2.zip

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Our sponsorship of the National Thought Leaders' Focus Group on the future role of America's community colleges in workforce development was conceived to be a brief opportunity to gather some of our favorite clients and most respected colleagues around a critical and timely discussion.

Using only two short, web-based meetings, we hoped to be able to serve as a convener, a facilitator and a sponsor of that discussion – and to do so with minimal disruption to the schedules of those we hoped to engage.

There is some risk, we realize, in attempting to address such a complex topic so quickly. Some might view the result with concern that we did not use more time to be more thorough – perhaps more carefully or completely examine the issues at hand. We acknowledge those concerns.

However, we did not seek to answer the great questions about what should be reformed, when or at what cost. We sought only to begin a dialogue with respected policy- and practitioner-minded leaders who we think will be at the center of the debate.

To that end, these discussions exceeded our expectations. We invite a broader discussion and new ideas and encourage others to add value in the weeks and months ahead. As policy and new legislation emerges, we hope this “early start” will better prepare our institutions to expand their vision, advance their services, and ultimately meet the greater needs of the communities they serve.

Please feel free to send us your thoughts and comments:

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VII. ABOUT MAHER & MAHER

Maher & Maher, now in its 21st year, is a specialized change management and customized training development firm that serves clients in the communications and government services markets. We implement innovative organizational development solutions, focusing on change management, specialized consulting, training and facilitation (including e-learning strategy consulting), and customized courseware design. Our business services integration, process improvement and change management interventions help clients design and launch new initiatives, processes and solutions; cope with change; and align resources with organizational goals. Our training and learning solutions include leadership development, management, sales, customer satisfaction, and the development of customized instructor-led and e-learning curricula. Throughout the firm's history, Maher & Maher has been at the forefront of innovation in workforce development, economic development, and education. Recent client-partners include the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration; the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Adult and Vocational Education; the American Association of Community Colleges; community colleges throughout the country; and multiple state and regional consortia working to align workforce development and education strategies and activities in support of economic prosperity.