Community College Virtual Symposium

Topic Summaries

America's competitive advantage in the global marketplace depends on a qualified, skilled workforce, as does the economic well-being of those making up that workforce, their families, and their communities. As the largest segment of the U.S. postsecondary education system, community colleges offer affordable tuition, open admissions, flexible course schedules, and convenient locations, all advantages to those pursuing higher education or seeking to upgrade their skills for work. Two problems, however, must be addressed if community colleges are to continue as engines of workforce development and economic prosperity: low rates of persistence and completion and insufficient alignment of college programs and workforce expectations.

The U.S. Department of Education is sponsoring a series of issue briefs to serve as the basis for discussion at the *Community College Virtual Symposium (CCVS)*, an event that will be streamed live online on April 27, 2011. The purpose of the briefs and the symposium is to support state and institutional leaders in their efforts to address challenges facing community colleges.

During the symposium the researchers developing each brief will discuss their preliminary findings and take questions via email from participants. This document provides a description of each brief and serves as an introduction for the discussions to occur during the symposium.

We would like to collect some questions in advance for the researchers to consider. Please send any questions you have that relate to the topics summarized in this document to the following email address by **Friday, April 22, 2011**: **Virtual.Symposium.2011@ed.gov**.

Promoting College and Career Readiness: Bridge Programs for Low-Skill Adults

Many low-skill adults with a secondary credential or less are underprepared for further education or employment.[1] Even for those who improve their skills or ultimately receive their GED, educational and employment advancement often is difficult. Research reveals the disparity between adults' desire to enter postsecondary education and the preparation and support they may need to make that transition successfully. It also points to the difficulties adults may encounter in achieving their postsecondary goals.[2]

Career pathway bridge programs are one of the more prevalent interventions intended to improve college and career readiness for adults. These programs connect adult basic education, adult secondary education, and English-as-a-second-language students to community college occupational programs. They support the transition from adult education to the next step in an occupational pathway by helping adult students identify career and education goals and develop the academic skills, occupational content knowledge, and learning strategies they need to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and employment.[3] Moreover, a variety of support services help students persist and succeed in their educational programs.

Given the widespread interest in bridge programs and experimentation with innovative practices across the country, we are now able to learn from recent evaluations and the numerous descriptive reports of promising practices.[4] This brief will describe components of bridge programs through the lens of three statewide examples that have descriptive data and varying degrees of outcome data to document their effectiveness.[5] The brief also will highlight policies and practices that support adults' transition to postsecondary education and employment.

Aligning Secondary and Postsecondary Education: Experiences from Career and Technical Education (CTE)

A postsecondary credential—a degree, certificate, or industry license—is increasingly necessary to obtain a skilled job and good wages,[6] but studies show that even if students have a high school diploma they may not be fully prepared for postsecondary education and training.[7] Students may be underprepared for postsecondary coursework for several reasons, among them the different expectations for high school graduation and postsecondary entry. Greater alignment of these expectations can promote easier student

transitions, less course duplication, and a reduced need for developmental coursework upon college enrollment.

CTE was an early pioneer in efforts to connect secondary and postsecondary education, although early efforts generally connected individual secondary courses or course sequences with a specific occupational program at one or a few community colleges. In the last few years CTE alignment efforts have begun focusing on preparing secondary students for a broad array of postsecondary opportunities and careers. This brief will describe the evolution of CTE efforts to align secondary and postsecondary education and will outline several state and local initiatives that exhibit promising approaches to effectively aligning secondary and postsecondary education for all students, including those in high school CTE programs.

Connecting Curriculum, Assessment, and Treatment for Developmental Education

Research indicates that many recent high school students are underprepared for postsecondary education and training,[8] with 50–60 percent of entering community college students enrolling in at least one developmental education course to bring their reading, writing, and mathematics skills up to college level.[9]

Developmental education can offer underprepared students an opportunity to gain the skills needed for postsecondary education and training. The cost of developmental education, however, can be steep for families, colleges, and taxpayers.[10] Research indicates that developmental education may not improve students' persistence or completion rates[11] and, in some cases, may actually hinder their progress toward educational goals.[12]

Recent research indicates that the effects of developmental education are nuanced, varying according to student ability, and suggests that different approaches may be required to address diverse student needs and abilities.[13] By aligning curriculum (what students are taught), assessment (how colleges determine students' abilities and readiness for the next level), and treatment (courses, tutoring, or other support), educators potentially can improve developmental students' chances for success. This brief will describe recent changes in developmental education and highlight strategies that attempt to align curriculum, assessment, and treatment.

Employer Engagement: Integrating Industry-Driven Competencies in Education and Training

Strong links between employers and community colleges can help prepare students for employment by ensuring that curriculum and instruction align with workplace realities. To achieve this alignment, employers and colleges are forming partnerships to address curriculum development. By doing so, they hope to integrate the skills and competencies needed in the local job market into college instruction and to design programs that train students for further education and jobs in high-demand industries.

This brief will present a framework for employer engagement by considering the degree to which industry content is integrated into college curricula, and describe partnerships representing innovative solutions to local labor market needs, industry-led initiatives, and state policies encouraging employer engagement. Although the empirical—or even evaluative—research base is far from definitive, some evidence suggests that these partnerships are successful. The brief will also discuss the implications of these partnerships and offer resources for employers who want to investigate how to begin such a partnership.

Endnotes

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