

Building More Comprehensive Community College Success Metrics: Why Completing a Degree Is Not the Only Way to Succeed

Recent research on the California community college system has revealed that workforce-training programs yield some of the highest earnings for community college students, regardless of whether those students complete a degree or college certificate. Yet, most conversations about community college success are limited to whether students graduate. An exclusive focus on degree completion does not fit well with the diversity of workforce training pathways that colleges have built in career and technical education (CTE) because many of these pathways do not lead to a college credential. By expanding definitions of student success to include employment, earnings gains, and third-party credentials, colleges will be able to more accurately measure the outcomes for all of their CTE programs.

Understanding CTE Pathways

Community colleges offer many different career training pathways to serve a diverse population of students with widely varying needs and goals. In addition to providing comprehensive programs that teach the fundamental skills of various professions, community colleges support rapidly evolving fields in which supplemental training is regularly needed, as well as the retraining of experienced workers for emerging professions. This training may be offered in a number of ways, including coursework in for-credit programs, noncredit classes, and customized contract education designed and sponsored by specific employers.

For some students and some fields of study, traditional degree programs are the best bet. For example, comprehensive programs work well for students coming straight out of high school who need to build a solid base of skills and for students who are pursuing complex skill sets, such as those needed in health or aviation. These pathways substantially improve students' earning power and future career opportunities, leading to family-sustaining wages that can help move them out of poverty. Community college students in California who earn a certificate in diagnostic medical imaging make a median wage of more than \$73,000, up from about \$13,000 before starting college. Aircraft maintenance students who earn an associate's degree more than double their earnings, from \$20,000 to over \$44,000.

However, community colleges also serve students who already have been in the workforce. These students may have associate or baccalaureate degrees, third-party or community college certificates, or significant work experience without a supporting credential. Returning students often need to fill-in a few missing skills rather

than starting from scratch, and they can do so either by taking a handful of courses or by participating in short-term certificate programs that can be completed in a year or less.

Moreover, some workforce training pathways lead to third-party credentials offered outside of community colleges, such as in early childhood education. In California, students take a short sequence of courses that are aligned with state licensure exams that allow them to work in a daycare center or start their own pre-school. Students see average earnings gains of 6 percent after 18 credits—a pretty good return on investment when you consider that these students took just six courses and had tuition costs of under \$1,000. Students in other higher-wage fields see much more dramatic returns. Administration of Justice students, such as police officers who take courses at a community college to earn a Peace Officer Standards and Training certificate, see an average earnings increase of 20 percent after 18 credits.

A review of CTE programs in the California system reveals many different pathways—sometimes even in the same discipline. For example, in the field of information technology, colleges may offer an associate's degree in computer software development that helps young people move into jobs requiring coding skills or prepares them for baccalaureate degrees in computer science. The same college also may offer short-term certificates designed to help IT professionals learn new skills, such as mobile application development or game programming. Some of these short-term options may lead to a community college certificate that is not counted in statewide success metrics because it is too short, yet it can help workers advance professionally and increase their earnings. Other course clusters may enable workers to pass third-party exams, such as the Cisco or Adobe certifications.

The Prevalence of Skills-BUILDER Students

Although the focus often is on degree pathways, there are a large number of students who are pursuing shorter-term training. This trend has been growing steadily for the last 30 years. According to the Center for Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, certificates have become so popular that they now are the second most common higher education credential in the United States, behind baccalaureate degrees, but ahead of associate degrees. Nationwide, 54 percent of these certificate programs are short-term, meaning that they can be earned in a year or less.

By examining course-taking patterns in California community colleges, Peter Riley Bahr of the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan found that one in seven first-time students take six or fewer credits (two classes or less) with an average course pass rate of 93 percent. The majority of these students are enrolled in career and technical

education, and their exceptionally high rate of success indicates that they are mastering the content of their courses. Many of these students see earnings gains after just six credits. Some fields, such as water and wastewater technology, where students train for licensed fields involved in preserving the health of California's waterways, have returns as high as 17 percent after 6 credits.

Two other studies found that significant numbers of California community college students who take CTE courses do not earn a credential, but do demonstrate earnings gains, particularly among the older segment of the student population. Ryan Fuller of the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office noted that several categories of students earned more money without a credential than those who attained a degree or certificate, including students aged 25 and older who took ten credits or less, students aged 35 and older taking any number of credits, and students who reported "personal development" or "updating job skills" as their goals for college attendance. For example, non-completing students between the ages of 35-44 earned about \$15,000 more than completers. KC Greaney of Santa Rosa Junior College also found evidence of students leveraging community college coursework for mid-career advancement. A survey of former CTE students documented that non-completing students had higher wages before beginning their studies than students who earned a credential or transferred to a four-year college. Although completers had larger earnings gains than non-completers, both groups had significant increases, with non-completers improving their earnings by 22 percent.

A More Comprehensive Definition of Success

Comprehensive programs and short-term skills-building courses both have positive impacts on students' employment and earnings prospects. However, because the completion of a community college credential is viewed as the gold standard for success, students who participate in short-term training are counted as failures. While short-term training is not the best fit for every student, it is an important vehicle for improving the labor market position of an increasing number of students due to the evolving nature of the job market. Many workers are shifting from jobs that no longer exist to professions that did not exist when they first attended college. Increasingly, the credentials that employers are seeking for these jobs are issued by third-party industry-sponsored entities rather than academic institutions. As more employers expect job applicants to be ready for work with no additional training, the burden of professional development is falling on individuals. Finally, as technology increasingly is integrated into jobs ranging from auto repair to real estate, workers need ongoing training to keep up their skills.

If college success is measured by graduation alone, training pathways that focus on filling skill-gaps rather than on degree attainment are at risk. Colleges may push skills-builders to the bottom of the enrollment priority line or elect not to offer courses that are not in a completion pathway. The result is that students will be forced to go to for-profit training providers to learn these skills, where they will pay significantly higher prices. Students who cannot afford these higher prices will be prevented from advancing their skills and improving their labor market

position, which is a loss for students and the state.

Colleges will be better able to prioritize offerings that are of high value to students and to employers if they have access to comprehensive workforce training outcomes, such as whether these students secure an industry-recognized third-party credential, transition into employment, or increase their earnings. With access to this information, community colleges will be in a much stronger position to evaluate and strengthen all of their career and technical education pathways.

What You Can Do

Here are examples of conversations and actions that various parties could take:

Policymakers

- Expand community colleges success metrics: Incorporate outcomes such as employment, earnings, and completion of third-party credentials.
- Improve access to data: Explore ways to regularize or automate information sharing between state licensing agencies and community colleges, and seek to secure agreements to share earnings data with neighboring states.

College Leaders

- Expand community colleges success metrics: For the purposes of accreditation, program review, and resource allocation, include a broader array of student outcomes, such as employment, earnings, and the completion of third-party certifications.
- Establish policies for skills-builder students: Set appropriate policies for low-unit CTE students, particularly regarding assessment, educational planning, and course repeatability.

CTE Directors and Faculty

- Examine local pathways: Collect and analyze data to determine where short-term course-taking fits into students' overall career pathways, how it relates to industry needs, and who benefits most from particular types of training. Share this information with college leaders to drive goal setting, program development, and student advising.
- Assess programs based on more comprehensive metrics: Once program pathways and likely outcomes are clear, ensure that program review and departmental improvement efforts are informed by data that include employment, earnings, and third-party certification outcomes, in addition to completion measures.

Find Out More

NISOD will host a webinar about this research on August 28, 2014. Visit www.nisod.org to sign up. You can read practitioner-oriented briefs on the earnings for career and technical education students; download a video, related discussion, and action guides on more comprehensive success metrics; and dive into detailed research at www.wested.org.

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