

Linchpins for Economic Opportunity: Community Colleges & Community-Based Organizations

By

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Currently our economy is down; unemployment figures are up. But these economic conditions will not remain for long. And, as the economy recovers, so will the demand for high-skill tech-savvy workers in fields as diverse as information technology, office technologies, health careers, and biotechnology and the life sciences. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2003) shows that high-skilled jobs in information technology and healthcare careers will be the fastest growing fields through 2010. The statistics also show that the low-skilled jobs of retail and waiters/waitresses will also grow in the same time period. But as the economy expands will high-wage economic opportunities for the poor expand proportionately? Too often low-income families are the last to benefit from economic expansion and among the first to be affected by downturns in the economy. Wonacott (2003) describes the effectiveness of short-term training in welfare-to-work programs as being minimal with the effects of the job training wearing out in four to five years. A longer term strategy in job training is needed that provides low-income families access to higher education that is tied to degrees and long-term career opportunities.

Community-Based Organizations in Low-Income Communities

Many faith-based and community-based organizations are doing truly remarkable work in poorer communities. They are locally well-known organizations, trusted by neighborhood

residents for providing many critical family and social services. In their efforts to help adults out of poverty, community-based organizations often provide excellent training programs that give their clients skills leading to employment. But too few of these training programs have the capacity to move adults beyond low-wage, entry-level employment. They lack the capacity to link their services to on-going training and education programs that can help move residents from the periphery to the mainstream of the economy.

Dozens of workforce initiatives funded by the government and by the technology industry were launched during the last economic expansion when information technology jobs grew faster than the supply of available skilled workers. Many of these initiatives were directed at bringing the poor into the mainstream of economic activity by bridging the “digital divide” and providing technology-related job skills to residents of low-income communities. For example, over 1,200 Community Technology Centers (CTCs) were funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Housing and Urban Development and other private sources. Many of these CTCs provided participants with an outstanding start at job training, but few provided direct linkages to employers or to continuing education opportunities beyond their own centers.

Another example comes from the technology industry that launched its own initiatives reaching into low-income communities to bridge the digital divide. PowerUP, a technology initiative supported by the AOL Time Warner Foundation, Cisco Systems, Hewlett-Packard and others, established 960 sites, many of which were hosted by

community-based organizations including Boys and Girls Clubs, public housing organizations, charter schools, and YM/YWCAs. Often these sites provided IT skills training, but seldom were there job placement services or connections with post-secondary educational opportunities.

Community-Based Organizations and Higher Education

Even though a college education remains the surest ticket to long-term self-sufficiency, community-based training providers typically are not connected with higher education systems. Adults who complete initial skills training face an unfamiliar, disconnected and confusing array of institutions and services without a clear definition of what next steps they need to take for their success. Trainees in community-based training programs who complete extensive coursework rarely receive college credit for their coursework. Moreover, of the 290 non-collegiate training and education providers recommended for college credit by the American Council of Education's College Credit Recommendation Service, none appear to be community-based training providers serving low-income Americans. Because of these systemic disconnects, graduates of community-based training programs face barriers to continuing their education. And, if they do find a college where they can enroll, they face a foreign environment and are required to repeat subject matter they have already learned. Low-income adults who struggle daily just to make ends meet simply don't have the expertise or energy to simultaneously overcome multiple barriers and master these disconnected and confusing systems. Without continuing their educations they jeopardize long-term career success and risk falling back

into low-wage, dead-end jobs. As a result, they become stuck, placing their livelihoods and their families' welfare at risk.

The Community College as a Linchpin to Sustained Economic Opportunity

Community colleges could serve as linchpins of economic opportunity for those completing community-based job training programs. Community colleges, over 1,100 strong across the country and located in nearly every community, have the organizational capacity to build upon previously completed workforce training, to link that training with more advanced education and high-wage employment, and to provide adults with a portable credential. Community colleges have the programs and services that can provide a broader educational foundation in communication, math, reasoning skills, and soft-skills development that lead to greater worker flexibility when changes in technology or in the marketplace require that workers become adaptive.

However, too often community colleges are missing in action when it comes to delivering training programs in low-income communities and not viewed as familiar, trusted organizations. Among the poor, few have experiences with anyone in their family or community going to college. By reaching out and linking with community-based organizations, community colleges could deliver the kinds of services that can move adults from initial success to sustainable economic progress and help build a workforce pipeline that will moderate the coming skills shortages for businesses. Several national models stand out that might be instructive in seeking a connecting strategy between community colleges and community-based organizations.

San Antonio, Texas: “Project QUEST”

“Project QUEST” (www.quests.com), an innovative job training program in San Antonio, Texas, is winning statewide and national attention as a model for local workforce development efforts. Since 1993, Project QUEST has met the needs of San Antonio area businesses by training local residents who would otherwise be out of work and/or on public assistance. Project QUEST is a partnership between Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), the Metro Alliance, and the Alamo Community College District that provides employer-driven educational opportunities to low-income and underserved populations in San Antonio. The goals of Project QUEST are to demonstrate an employer-driven system that increases quality job opportunities, job training programs for long-term employment and higher incomes, an individual approach that works better than an institution-based approach, and that a better skills workforce will provide better economic opportunities for the San Antonio area. The Alamo Community College district offers college credit towards a two-year degree in several targeted programs like healthcare/medical, information technology/business services, and computer installation, maintenance and repair.

San Francisco, California: “BayTEC”

On the West Coast in Silicon Valley, community-based organizations like Street Tech, Urban VOICE and Eastmont Computing Center and Peralta Community College and Contra Costa Community College partnered to create the Bay Area Technology

Education Cooperative (BayTEC). This alliance provides low-income families access to educational opportunities that lead to college credit for their work. The purpose of BayTEC is described on its web site (www.baytec.org): ...“community-based IT training organizations like Street Tech, Urban VOICE, Eastmont Computing Center, and others have demonstrated that IT jobs are not solely reserved for computer programmers with advanced degrees but, with the right training and support, low-income, unemployed individuals with no prior IT experience can successfully enter and hold these jobs, earn living wages, and gain substantial career perspectives.” This cooperative could serve as a national model for integrating services between community colleges and community-based job training providers so that low-income adults can climb step-by-step out of poverty towards long-term success.

Northern Virginia: “Steps-to-Success”

Just outside the Beltway in the Washington, DC metropolitan region, Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and Northern Virginia Family Services (NVFS) have formed a “Steps-to-Success” alliance (www.nvfs.org) that enables hundreds of low-income residents and immigrants in Northern Virginia to lift their families out of poverty and launch themselves on new career paths by obtaining skills training and college credentials so that they can share in the American dream. NVFS is a community-based organization that provides a comprehensive array of social services to more than 25,000 children and adults annually. One of its offerings is a 22-week program called Training Futures that for the past seven years has prepared low-income and unemployed adults with job skills needed for entry level office work such as data entry, administrative

assistant, customer service, receptionist or accounting clerk. NOVA is the nation's second largest multi-campus community college offering more than 130 degree and certificate programs that provide for the first two years of a four-year degree or lead to high-wage technical and paraprofessional employment. NOVA serves more than 60,000 students annually at its five campuses.

The "Steps-to-Success" partnership serves low-income adults and recent immigrants who are unlikely to consider college but who enroll in the NVFS Training Futures program to get the skills and the confidence that will land them an entry-level office job. Nearly 80 percent of the trainees are women, most support dependent children, and many are single parents trying to raise a family on one income. Eighty percent are minorities and half are foreign-born. All trainees are from low-income households with approximately one-fifth receiving public assistance. Together NOVA and NVFS have joined their resources to create a job-training pipeline that produces immediate job skills and employment opportunity together with the sustainable benefits of a college education. The NVFS Training Futures program provides a safe, trusted, neighborhood-based location; comprehensive family and social services; and skill training for entry-level office work. In the early stages of the pipeline NOVA assists by providing career counseling and English as a Second Language instruction for immigrants wishing to enter the program.

The NVFS Training Futures curriculum teaches computer skills, business English, business math, keyboarding, bookkeeping, filing, basic accounting, and business communication skills. NOVA's career counselors offer personalized academic and

career guidance services on- site to provide additional support for trainees who want to continue learning and professional development through college courses and degree programs. Trainees become familiar with the college and its staff even before they finish their initial training program. Upon graduating from the NVFS Training Futures program, NOVA recognizes trainees' achievements by formally admitting them to the college and by awarding seven college credits and advanced placement in one of its business and office certificate or degree programs.

To date, 290 adults have graduated from the NVFS Training Futures program and have been admitted to NOVA with college credit and advanced placement as part of the Steps-to-Success program. Approximately 90 percent have secured new full-time jobs, earning an average annual wage of nearly \$28,000 plus benefits. Before the "Steps-to-Success" program was established, 72 percent of NVFS Training Futures graduates expressed "high interest" in achieving a two-year degree, yet only 14 percent had taken the first step by enrolling in their initial college course. Now, 100 Steps-to-Success students are expected to graduate with a community college degree or certificate within the next three years.

Community Colleges and Community-Based Organizations Offer Hope in a Time of Declining Resources

Community college / community-based organization alliances serve to leverage and strengthen each other's assets, especially in a time when resources are declining. With their grass-roots constituencies and relationships with other social service organizations, community-based organizations represent an efficient and credible feeder system and

bridge to recruiting college aspirants from low-income and immigrant families who might not otherwise enroll in college courses. Community colleges offer graduates of community-based programs not only broad access to higher education, but to sustainable high-wage jobs. Such partnerships offer the potential of streamlining services between two overlapping systems to remove barriers to college access and economic opportunity and replacing them with new pathways from low-wage, dead-end and sporadic jobs, to high-skill, career-track, long-term employment. Such partnerships combine what both organizations do best and better leverage existing organizational assets for the long-term benefit of low-income families.

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