These two leaders have much in common. Both recognize the increasingly important role of their institutions and learning programs as a gateway to the middle class. Both have successfully guided their colleges toward better outcomes for low-income and less skilled youth and adults. They have been so successful, in fact, that their institutions—Sinclair Community College and West Hills Community College—have been named recipients of the MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Awards (see box).

These leaders—and others like them around the country—are responding to powerful demographic and economic forces that are driving a less college-ready population to seek post-secondary credentials. Consider these challenges:

■ 80 percent of Community College of Vermont students are the first in their families to attend college.
■ Over half the high school students in the largely Hispanic region around San Jacinto North College in Houston drop out; only one of five 9th graders even plans to attend college.

By Richard Kazis, Leslie Haynes, and Martin Liebowitz
First-time college-goers, new immigrants, working adults, welfare recipients, high school dropouts, and other populations with limited college experience and success are increasingly dependent upon community colleges for an educational and economic leg up. How are colleges responding?

Lessons from the MetLife Foundation Awards
This past year, Jobs for the Future studied strategies that community colleges are using to improve the quality and effectiveness of their services to low-income youth and adults. Much of this research was conducted for the MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Awards Initiative. Across the country, in urban, rural, and suburban communities, we saw colleges successfully adapting to meet new local needs, including colleges that:

- Use community organizing techniques to recruit immigrants, minorities, out-of-school populations, and working adults;
- Make it possible for high school dropouts to work toward college degrees while earning their diplomas;
- Enable low-wage workers to advance by combining work and credential programs in a blended, modularized sequence.
- Help adults with low literacy skills and immigrants with limited English proficiency combine remediation with technical skills programs that qualify them for jobs quickly; and
- Play a vital role in organizing regional partnerships to promote high-wage employment opportunities and train less-skilled individuals for better jobs.

As a result of innovations like these, underserved youth and adults are entering college, going farther in their education, and earning credentials that matter in life and work.

The most ambitious strategies share a common approach. Colleges design specialized programs and services for distinct hard-to-serve subgroups (e.g., immigrants, working adults, first-generation college-goers). They then link those programs in clear and transparent ways so students can travel coherent pathways, from wherever they begin in the college, to credentials valued in labor and educational markets (Liebowitz et al. 2001). Innovative colleges target three goals:

- Access to credential programs;
- Retention of students to the completion of their immediate educational program; and
- Advancement into a better job or further education to achieve long-term career goals.

Access to College
To reach people whose first language is not English or who are first-generation college-goers, colleges’ marketing and recruitment strategies must speak to the needs, hopes, and fears of these potential students. Promising strategies emphasize:

- Focused outreach and recruitment;
- Structural alignment with secondary schools that eases the transition to college; and
- Financial aid that takes into account the realities of working adults’ schooling patterns and finances.

Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, targets its outreach to zip codes with high percentages of African-American and Appalachian residents. The effort has paid off: the number of students applying for financial aid increased by 23 percent in 2000–2001 and first-generation college-
goers rose from 23 to 31 percent of enrollments.

For West Hills Community College, which serves a rural, largely migrant population in California’s San Joaquin Valley, access for the area’s Hispanics is its highest priority. Through investments that include van service and high-quality, on-campus child care centers, West Hills has doubled its enrollments in the past six years, reversing a trend of declining enrollment.

Research by San Jacinto North College revealed that large numbers of applicants to the college never enrolled. The college overhauled its enrollment process to be more user-friendly and saw the gap between applications and enrollment shrink almost 50 percent in a few years, to less than 14 percent.

Retention and Persistence
Without concerted efforts to help low-income populations stay longer and complete their educational programs, aggressive outreach to hard-to-serve groups is likely to result in costly and demoralizing quick departures for most new students. Fortunately, recent research has identified a range of promising strategies for improving retention of low-income students (Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001). These strategies include student support and counseling centers, locating public agencies on campus, on-campus child care, particularly on nights and weekends, and more flexible financial aid for working adults. Other innovations focus on program redesign that makes it easier for working adults to earn credentials, from short-term certification programs to improvements in the integration of developmental and occupational education and of credit and non-credit courses.

Malcolm X Community College in Chicago addresses student retention by engaging recent high school graduates in student support groups facilitated by “Peer Advocates.” The advocates, upper-class students selected competitively, receive extensive training to mentor new students in navigating college requirements.

To improve retention in its credit programs, Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina, runs a formal orientation program for all new students, and it created a freshman course on time management and study habits that enrolls over 500 first-year students each semester. CPCC has also eliminated the administrative distinction between academic and developmental education in an effort to better integrate the two functions and accelerate entry into credential programs.

In its pre-college program, Portland Community College’s multiple entry points allow students with as low as third-grade-level reading and math skills to enroll in non-credit and developmental education courses that are directly linked to credit-based career education programs. For working adults with limited English proficiency, PCC has created a number of short-term occupational skills programs that integrate basic skills, workplace-specific language skills, and culturally appropriate job readiness activities in a 12–20 week training program that emphasizes job placement upon completion. In a pilot that the college hopes to expand to other sectors, PCC has restructured its manufacturing technology program to include an open entry/open exit competency-based option, based on industry-accepted standards. Students work at their own pace; the learning center is open twelve hours a day. Some students have earned two-year certificates or credentials in one year.

Advancement to a Better Occupation
To help low-skill students progress toward credentials that can make a difference in the labor market, some colleges are creating industry-focused “pathways” or “career ladder” programs. This reorientation of education and training emphasizes integration of typically distinct and disconnected learning programs into a transparent, logical, and accelerated progression. Examples include: adult literacy and basic skills courses that can lead quickly to a GED or high school diploma; occupational “bridge” courses that can graduate working adults into entry-level, skilled jobs and provide intermediate credentials; and academic and occupational degree programs linked to the hiring needs of employers in growth industries and occupations.

In response to the needs of working adults, Sinclair Community College has made accelerated education a high priority. Developmental education—the college’s largest department, serving 42 percent of all students—is moving toward more flexible scheduling, supported self-paced curricula, and curricular integration into high-demand occupational programs. Sinclair offers 31 different competency-based, short-term certificate programs to serve adults balancing work, family, and education. Sinclair’s Access to Better Jobs program provides short-term workforce train-
ing to the unemployed and working poor below 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines. The initial emphasis is on short-term credit and non-credit training needed to get jobs. Part-time students, who do not qualify for Pell Grants, receive financial assistance with tuition and other work and education-related costs. Once participants are employed, the focus shifts to helping them obtain financial aid and continue working toward two- or four-year degrees.

McHenry County College in Illinois created an Associate of Applied Sciences degree program that allows students to earn two certificates and an associate of applied science degree by attending school part-time, one evening a week over a four-year period. Courses are taught on-site at five local businesses. Of the students who earned an associate degree, 75 percent earned one or more promotions while attending the program. Employers believe the program helps them retain employees who might otherwise leave the county for higher wages.

Advancement to Further Education

Comprehensive advancement strategies for low-income students must include bridges to four-year college programs, yet transfer to four-year college has historically posed a serious challenge. To address this challenge, community colleges are developing innovative collaborations, strengthening partnerships with four-year institutions, and improving the communication of expectations between institutions.

Madison Area Technical College is the largest source of transfer students for the University of Wisconsin Madison. The partnership is being formalized through a new dual-enrollment system: first-year students will be accepted at both institutions but take their first- and second-year courses at MATC.

Through creative supports and rigorous courses that emphasize writing and higher order thinking skills, Community College of Vermont has achieved a transfer rate of 50 percent for its students, far above the national average. Its transfer students to the University of Vermont have a higher average GPA than the student body as a whole.

West Hills Community College is partnering with Fresno State College to make transfer more attractive. Teleconferencing and video broadcasts from Fresno State are combined with academic support from the four-year school at West Hills’ Lemoore campus. Students interested in pursuing a four-year degree, including a teaching degree, are co-enrolled at West Hills and Fresno State. This partnership is one reason that West Hills, despite its largely migrant population, is one of the few California community colleges with an increasing transfer rate to the four-year system.

From Good Programs to Institution-wide Commitment

The MetLife Foundation Awards recognize six colleges that have woven a commitment to improved outcomes for the underserved into the very fabric of the college. With leadership from the president and board down through the academic and continuing education faculties, the winners and finalists excel along five dimensions of institutional change:

■ Deep institutional commitment evident in mission and program scale;
■ Integration of that commitment across divisions into comprehensive pathways to advancement;
■ Community-wide mobilization that puts the college at the center of effective partnerships with schools, community-based organizations, the business community, four-year institutions, and government;
■ Innovation and creativity through an ongoing cycle of incubation, innovation, implementation, and scale-up of new strategies; and
■ Continuous improvement that uses evaluation of student outcomes to drive change.

For these colleges, improving outcomes for low-income students is not a fad. Their leaders understand that the obstacles facing those with the least education and skills are becoming more acute while the expectations that community colleges will serve these youth and adults well are rising.

Ultimately, colleges that embrace this agenda will need state and federal help. The impressive instructional innovations, supports and services, recruitment and retention efforts, links between credit and non-credit programs, pathways for working adults, and cooperation with four-year institutions described above are not easily funded or sustained. However, as the MetLife Foundation Awards demonstrate, there is significant momentum among community colleges to take on the challenge. Wider recognition for those that are succeeding can encourage others to take risks—and, over time, set the stage for more favorable public policies.

References


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