Capacity Building in Community Colleges for Student Career Success

How Public and Philanthropic Grants Can Help Build Capacity

October 2016 • **Andrew L. Yarrow**

Introduction

How can America's community colleges build their capacity to provide more effective education and training and serve a broader population of students, allowing them to find decent jobs and careers and meet employers' needs for specific skills? The federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program was designed to help community colleges in the United States build their institutional and system-wide capacity and make progress toward these goals.

Developing metrics and methods for assessing the outcomes of capacity-building investments is challenging. Because of this, assessment tends to mean documenting the number of students and the education and employment outcomes of students served by new programming implemented as part of capacity-building investments. But learning about colleges' experiences building and sustaining their capacity is critical for the workforce development field to continue to make progress, as well as to launch and institutionalize new programs that are effective for students and employers. Additionally, funders need insights about what college implementers have learned through capacity-building efforts to inform their work.

This document provides a short summary of key themes discussed at a meeting to learn about community colleges' experiences with TAACCCT-funded capacity-building work and highlight areas that merit further exploration, convened by the Aspen Institute Workforce Strategies Initiative (AspenWSI), together with Achieving the Dream (ATD), on April 18, 2016, in Washington, DC. The meeting brought together nearly 40 community-college leaders, US Department of Labor and other federal agency officials, and workforce development scholars and practitioners. (Appendix A lists the organizations represented at the meeting.) The statements in this document reflect an overview of points raised by participants at the meeting as they discussed their experiences with implementation of work conducted through TAACCCT.

Notably, the discussion was launched with a review of four "promising practices" briefs, published by AspenWSI in 2016.[1] The briefs describe how colleges in the Credentials to Careers (C2C) TAACCCT consortium used TAACCCT grants to build institutional capacity to better serve students. The C2C consortium, led by Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), is one of the 26 TAACCCT multi-state consortium grantees around the country and is made up of six other community colleges that have invested their grant funds to provide Information Technology (IT) and other STEM-H training and credentials.[2] The lessons from the promising practices briefs helped to inform many of the discussions during the meeting.

TAACCCT

There have been many initiatives in recent decades to strengthen the role and capabilities of America's community colleges to help young and adult students attain the skills and credentials to get good jobs with ladders for career advancement. TAACCCT was authorized under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to provide community colleges and other eligible institutions of higher education with funds to expand and improve their ability to deliver education and career-training programs of two years or less, and prepare Americans—particularly unemployed workers impacted by trade—for jobs.[3]

TAACCCT, which was administered by the US Department of Labor with support from the US Department of Education, awarded $1.9 billion in grants over four years to more than 700 community colleges and other institutions of higher education.[4] Funded programs were required to include an industry-aligned curriculum leading to stackable credentials and developed with employer partners. Programs were charged with developing accelerated learning strategies including innovations such as offering credit for prior learning, competency-based assessment to reduce academic barriers to

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[1] The **four promising practices briefs** can be found on AspenWSI's website at
http://www.aspenwsi.org/resource/promising-practices-april-2016/
[2] The other six colleges in the consortium include Austin Community College in Texas; Shoreline Community College in Washington; Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan; Muskegon Community College in Michigan; Los Angeles Trade-Technical College in California; and Virginia Western Community College in Roanoke, Virginia. "STEM-H" includes Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Health.
[3] See **https://www.doleta.gov/taaccct/**, last modified September 2014
[4] Ibid

completing credentials, and hands-on experiences in workplaces.[5] The TAACCCT grantees also engaged organizations, including AspenWSI and Achieving the Dream, to play intermediary roles in promoting and evaluating the initiative.

Successful Capacity Building under TAACCCT

Since the first round of grants were awarded in 2011, nearly 290,000 students have been enrolled in TAACCCT funded programs, with 159,000 receiving credentials and 98,000 completing degree programs.[6] Beyond these numbers, success could have been defined in several ways. Success also meant reducing dropout rates and increasing completion, improving academic achievement, certification, and connecting both degree and non-degree students to jobs. In addition, providing financial aid to non-degree students; and instituting "blended" learning that is online, in the classroom, and in workplaces; were beneficial. It is also important that success meant developing innovative strategies to strengthen support within community colleges and collaboration with employers and others, and sharing learning and best practices with other institutions.

Building partnerships and sharing learning among schools have been ingredients of this success that were key grant requirements. Businesses helped design curricula and credentials, and provided hands-on learning and jobs. For example, at Mott Community College, in Flint, Mich., Bridgestone brought students to its plant floor to learn on manufacturing equipment, and at nearby Henry Ford Community College, employers provided state-of-the-art simulated environments so that students could step right into jobs.

Community colleges also developed partnerships with community-based organizations to make available "wraparound" and other social services for low-income students. Virginia Western Community College, for example, partnered with Goodwill Industries, which provided case-management as well as training. Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), regional economic-development organizations, federal and state governments, and K-12 and four-year schools also often worked with community colleges.

Capacity Building in community colleges involves strengthening essential institutional capacities that underpin a student-focused culture that promotes positive educational and employment outcomes. These capacities, which are described in detail in Achieving the Dream's *Institutional Capacity Framework and Assessment Tool*, include data and technology; equity; teaching and learning; engagement and communication; strategy and planning; policies and practices; and leadership and vision. Meeting participants had the opportunity to refer to ATD's capacity framework as a reference throughout the meeting.

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[5] Ibid
[6] US Department of Labor, TAACCCT Overview. Presented by Robin Fernkas April 18, 2016, at Aspen Institute

Challenges to Address to Better Ensure Systemic Sustainability

There are significant challenges to colleges' ability to sustain, improve, and bring to scale the types of programs initiated or deepened by TAACCCT grants. Broadly speaking, these challenges are systemic—involving community colleges and the workforce-development system in general—and institutional, for individual schools. Additionally, higher education institutions are challenged to better meet students' and employers' needs. These needs include better messaging to promote opportunities for students and employers, better data to inform and assess programs, better ways to share learning and connect community colleges, and more consistent sources of funding for innovation, particularly since the federal commitment is tied to the vagaries of politics.

Measurement and Data

Community colleges and grantors often find it difficult to assess the larger impact of initiatives like TAACCCT, in part because access to good data on student academic and employment outcomes can be limited. There also are few good metrics for capacity-building and sustainability. These programs must be evidence-based and have measurable outcomes to ensure that dollars are wisely spent.

State and federal guidance and data-sharing from sources like the National Directory of New Hires are essential. A national student unit-record system to track students' progress in school and into the workforce, while controversial, could be beneficial. Evaluators need to be more involved, helping inform data collectors what data is most valuable. Community colleges would also benefit from building their institutional research capacity to collect information on their students. Placement data can help determine what jobs exist in a changing labor market.

The access and use of data to inform investments and practices is an ongoing issue that community colleges and grantors continue to grapple with.

Shared Learning and Improving Institutional Connections

Community college leaders and practitioners attempting to effect systemic changes would benefit by being able to more effectively share and disseminate information on what works and what does not. Although some peer learning occurs at conferences that bring together representatives of different community colleges, much more could be done to share best practices, especially with smaller schools with underserved populations. Grant applicants should articulate strategies for documenting and disseminating what they learn from their program experiences. Information sources like Open Educational Resources provide thousands of teaching, learning, and research materials for educational institutions, and robust Department of Labor and Department of Education databases of best practices and usable materials are beneficial. For instance, USDOL's, repository for usable resources, **www.SkillsCommons.org**, currently holds about 6,000 products (i.e. curriculum) developed by the four rounds of TAACCCT grantees.

Beyond developing better connections among community colleges to foster program success, building stronger partnerships with employers, community-based organizations, and the workforce system also would help improve and sustain programs and bring them to scale to reach more schools and students. Since employers provide training, registered apprenticeships, internships, and jobs, as well as other in-kind support and direct investment, schools need to expand, deepen, and cultivate ongoing relationships with businesses. Employers also need to feel that their needs are being served. Intermediaries like the American Association of Community Colleges, the Aspen Institute, Achieving the Dream, and federal agencies can provide greater technical assistance and facilitate shared learning through convenings, publications, and data.

Funding

With the TAACCCT grants ending, budgeting uncertainties exist. How can additional funding be provided to sustain and scale up these types of programs? Might clearly articulated and targeted policy agendas at the federal and state levels—on issues such as Pell Grants, and improving student and employment data—galvanize new funding? Could the National Science Foundation and foundations that already support these efforts expand their funding? Funders need to be better informed about why and how these programs, which help low-income and underserved students acquire skills, credentials, and jobs, are important for economic opportunity and equity as well as for business and the macro economy.

Designing new grants requires better alignment between the grant language and implementation as well as between institutional and regional strategies and programs. To more effectively build capacity in community colleges and identify strategic approaches to sustaining and scaling these capacities, grants also need greater flexibility and better outcome measures.

Strengthening Institutional Capacity

Community colleges have played, and been assigned, various roles in recent US history. In many ways one of the most innovative corners of higher education today, they remain torn between providing associate degrees, job-ready credentials, and preparation for four-year colleges. Although no longer free, they have focused on educating and training underserved populations. Still, completion rates have been poor and the pathways to either good jobs or continued education could be considerably improved.

Successful, multi-stakeholder workforce-development programs like those supported by TAACCCT grants require embedding these initiatives in community colleges and eliminating the differential treatment of non-degree students, students seeking associate's degrees, and students who do and do not work. They also require more seamless transitions from high school, more opportunities for unemployed adults to access accelerated training and return to work as quickly as possible, and articulation agreements to more effectively allow students to pursue four-year college degrees.

A predicate for this is a commitment to greater equity—to serving students of all socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds. Effectively serving all students will require sufficient and consistent federal, state, and philanthropic funding.

At the same time, institutional leadership, with knowledge of and commitment to innovative workforce programs, is essential. Community college leaders need to understand and make such programs a central focus of their institutions. To do so, they need a vision and target outcomes, as well as support for professional development and budgeting approaches for sustainability, all informed by research and close operational involvement with faculty, grant managers, and employers.

Meeting Students' Needs

Building systemic and institutional capacity is ultimately about meeting students' needs for education and training so that they can have well-paying, meaningful jobs that also serve the broader needs of their communities and the country. Students need to be able to afford tuition, which means access to Pell grants and other financial aid. Given many students' socioeconomic challenges, they also need remediation, wraparound services, and college and career "navigation" assistance, which help them identify careers for which they are suited and how to pursue them. Career navigator systems like the Department of Education's Integrated Planning Advisory Service, together with strong connections with employers and good placement services, can help make the difference between limited connection to the labor force and economic security.

Conclusion

Meeting discussions highlighted how TAACCCT grants highlighted provided community college grantees with important resources and support to innovate and foster culture changes in how they work with businesses, government, community-based organizations, and intermediaries. These culture changes are linked with improvements in student completion and employment outcomes. While community-college training programs are not a silver bullet for ensuring economic well-being for all Americans, well-designed and -supported initiatives are critical for providing opportunity and economic security for individuals and their families, as well as a strong economy.

About the Author

Andrew Yarrow is a consultant and Senior Fellow with the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program.

Appendix A: Organizations Represented

Achieving the Dream, Inc.

American Association of Community Colleges

Annie E. Casey Foundation

Aspen Institute (Economic Opportunities Program, College Excellence Program)

Austin Community College

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

Employment and Training Administration

Mott Community College

Northern Virginia Community College

Passaic County Community College

Ray Marshall Center for the Study for Human Resources, The University of Texas at Austin

Siemens Foundation

US Department of Commerce

US Department of Education

US Department of Energy

US Department of Health and Human Services

US Department of Labor

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Urban Institute

Virginia Western Community College

White House National Economic Council