



The Working Poor
Families Project

Connecticut's Community Colleges: Strengthening Our Workforce

Policy Brief #1

Access: Opening Doors to More Adult Learners

As the world of work becomes more specialized and technological, Connecticut employers face a growing need for skilled employees who can keep pace with new ways of doing business. This is true in the global economic downturn, even as small businesses are closing, and employers are laying off workers. Machine operators must be familiar with electronics. Store managers track computerized inventory. Technology has become a part of every job. An investment in education at every level is required to prepare employees for this workplace transformation.

Maintaining a Competitive Workforce in an Economic Downturn

As the state and the nation battle the current economic crisis, policymakers must not only balance the state's budget, they must do so in a manner that maintains Connecticut's economic flexibility over the long term. Support is growing for counter-cyclical measures that invest in human capital despite the recession. Those who support maintaining the state's education funding believe that a skilled workforce is the very thing that will infuse new life into the state's economy.¹

Before the current recession, apprehension about the Connecticut's ability to prepare highly skilled workers to fill high-skill jobs was already a major discussion point among economic forecasters and leaders in the business community.² Concern was also voiced about where along the educational pipeline emphasis and investment should be placed. Many analysts believe attention must be increased to Connecticut's postsecondary education system, particularly that which supports adult working students.

To date, the majority of Connecticut's workforce development effort has been focused on up and coming job entrants—young students who will move from high school through college and into advanced fields like aeronautics, biotechnology, and mechanical engineering. As important as it is, this strategy alone will not solve our present and future workforce problems.

The purpose of *Connecticut's Community Colleges: Strengthening Our Workforce* is to: (1) invigorate the conversation about the next level of workforce education and skill development that is needed in our state, (2) highlight the important role Connecticut community colleges play in preparing current adult workers for the jobs of the future, and (3) provide policymakers with recommendations and models of best practices from other states that are creating important links between community colleges and their adult workforce.

Adult workers must be ready to compete in an increasingly competitive work environment and meet the employment demands of the future. Two-thirds of the workforce that will be needed in 2020 are already working today.³ In addition, if Connecticut and most other states continue to focus postsecondary policy and programs primarily on traditional college-age students, the U.S. will fail to regain its competitive edge internationally.⁴ Connecticut policymakers must ensure access to a college education for adult working students. Without an effort to improve current workforce skills, our lagging ability to compete with other countries and the disconnect between employers' needs and labor force abilities will continue and worsen. Team work on the part of government, education leaders, employees, and employers will ensure that all adults have the skills to compete in the job market now and into the next decade.

To be competitive, many workers need job-skills upgrading, basic education, and business management rather than a four-year degree. According to the Connecticut Department of Labor, between 2004 and 2014, 40 percent of the fastest growing occupations in the state will require an associate's degree or on-the-job training.⁵ Connecticut's academic vision must include working adults who seek to improve their job skills through employment-related certificates, two-year degrees, and professional development.

Community Colleges and Connecticut's Workforce

Connecticut's community colleges are in the business of helping adult students build their work-related skills—providing ladders for success—and should be at the forefront of our educational planning for the future. Community colleges are the gateway for many adults, particularly those with limited skills who are looking to increase their economic security. Along with two-year degrees, community colleges offer work-related courses, certification in skilled trades, and technical training in a variety of fields.

Historically, community colleges have fostered an “open door” entrance policy, meaning applicants are accepted regardless of past academic performance as long as they demonstrate the ability to benefit and make academic progress. This policy allows a wide variety of students to pursue diverse academic objectives.

Community colleges support the employment goals of those who make up the nation's workforce. Almost 80 percent of the country's police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians and over half of new nurses and health care workers receive their associate's degree or certification from community colleges.⁶

But, community colleges are at a crossroads, experiencing a significant rise in applicants needing remedial education and increased demand to improve graduation rates. According to the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, at any time approximately 40 percent of Connecticut community college students need but may not be enrolled in remedial education in language arts and 60 percent in math.⁷ As the demand for a community college education grows, it is becoming harder to deliver a wide menu of classes and services for all students with the schools' limited funding. Adults with little academic experience and limited finances are those who most easily fall through the postsecondary cracks.

Connecticut's Community Colleges: Strengthening Our Workforce is a three-part series exploring policies and best practices that would improve Connecticut's ability to prepare workers to step into well-paying jobs.

Policy Brief #1. Access: Opening Doors to More Adult Learners

For some adult workers, achieving a college education seems beyond their reach. This brief looks at affordability, state funding, transitional programs, and outreach and public education as policy areas that affect the ability of adult learners to pursue postsecondary education.

Policy Brief #2. Success: What It Takes for Students to Make the Grade

Many community college students drop out before earning a certificate or an associate's degree. Policy areas related to adult student success include: balancing work, academic, and family responsibilities; remedial testing and course work; academic and nonacademic support; course structure; transitions to four-year colleges; and state funding.

Policy Brief #3. Accountability: Data and Planning for the Future

To determine which strategies increase retention and student success, more data are needed. Planners and program developers need data about student body composition, programs that improve educational outcomes, and the effect of education on wages and career advancement.

Did you know?

- In 2006, among Connecticut working families earning less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, 56 percent had no parent who had taken college courses.
- Only 6 percent of Connecticut adults between 25 and 54 were enrolled in postsecondary education.
- Connecticut residents with a high school degree earn \$15.11 an hour compared to \$27.85 for those with a Bachelor's degree or higher.⁸
- 20 percent of white and 36 percent of minority workers over 18 were employed in low-wage jobs (earning less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level or \$40,000 for a family of four).

Population Reference Bureau. 2006 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Connecticut Residents with an Associate's Degree or Higher by Race and Ethnicity

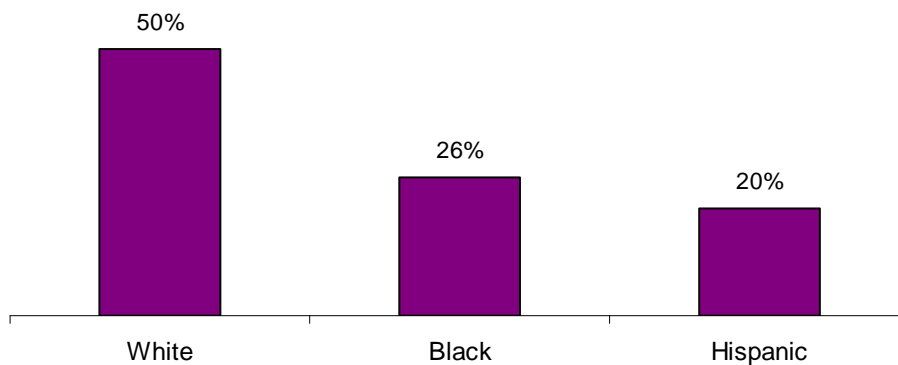


Figure 1. Population Reference Bureau. 2006 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau.

A Look at Connecticut Community Colleges

- Full-time enrollment grew by 90 percent between 2000 and 2007. Full-time enrollment at the University of Connecticut during the same time period grew by 23 percent and that of the Connecticut State University system grew by only 7 percent.⁹
- The majority of community college students (61.5 percent) were enrolled part-time while working to support themselves and their families.¹⁰
- 49 percent of community college students are between the ages of 22 and 50.
- 99 percent of financial aid given out at Connecticut community colleges is based on financial need.¹¹
- In 2007, 21,342 Connecticut community college students received a total of \$58.6 million in financial aid; 86 percent received grants, 9 percent loans, 1 percent scholarships, and 4 percent work study.¹²
- Since 2000, financial aid applications to community colleges have increased by 79 percent and aid disbursed has increased by 90 percent.¹³
- In 2007, the typical community college financial aid recipient was a woman, 32 years of age, who was a single mother with 2.4 children and had an annual family income of less than \$25,000.¹⁴
- Almost two-thirds of minority undergraduates in Connecticut public higher education institutions are enrolled in community colleges compared to less than one half of white undergraduates.¹⁵
- Approximately 50 percent of all undergraduates in public higher education are at the community colleges.¹⁶

Increasing Access: What Does It Take?

Several barriers stand in the way of low-income working adults returning to school by way of the community college system. Most low-income adult workers have few resources to pay for higher education. Money spent on college might be an investment in the future, but in the short term, more immediate family needs must come first.

To lower these barriers and increase access to higher education for working adults, decision-makers can institute new policies or expand existing policies related to affordability, outreach and public education, and transitions between adult education and community college courses.

Affordability—Expanding Financial Aid

In 2008, *Measuring Up: The State Report Card for Higher Education*, the biennial publication produced by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, gave Connecticut and 48 other states an “F” for the affordability of its public colleges.

While Connecticut’s investment in need-based financial aid is high compared to other states, the share of family income needed to pay for the cost of college also is high, even after accounting for financial aid. Across all income groups, Connecticut families paid on average 25 percent of their income after financial aid for the cost of community college in 2008. Families in the lowest income group with a median income of \$14,087 in 2008 would have spent 57 percent of their income on tuition and other costs associated with attending a Connecticut community college.¹⁷ According to national authorities, federally funded Pell grants have not kept pace with the rising cost of college tuition.¹⁸

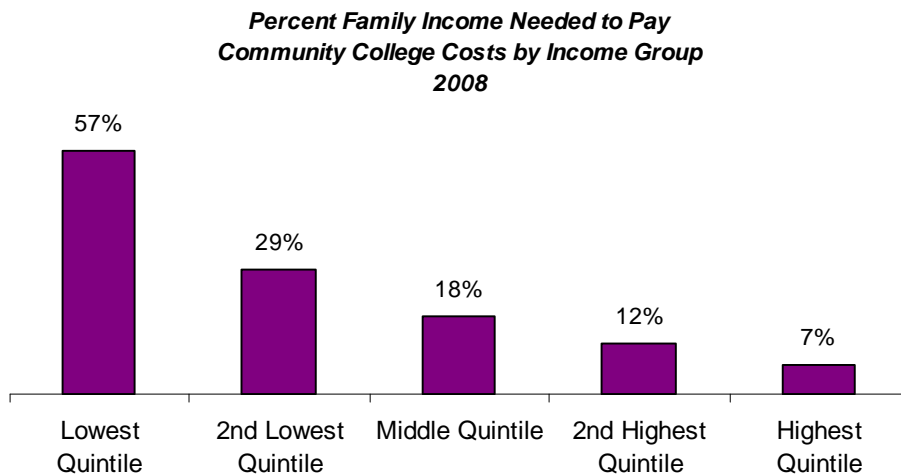


Figure 2. *Measuring Up 2008: The State Report Card for Higher Education. Connecticut.* Washington, DC: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

In 2007, Governor Rell and the state legislature injected new funding at an historic level into college financial aid. New funding to the Connecticut Aid to Public College Students (CAPCS) loan program amounted to approximately \$30 million for each year of the biennial budget, an increase of \$13.7 million compared to the 2007 allocation. Of this amount, approximately one-third was made available to community colleges for all qualifying students (those financially eligible who are enrolled in a degree or certificate program).¹⁹ No portion of these funds was set aside for adult students, those earning below a certain threshold of need, or those pursuing a work-related degree or certificate. Financial need among our college students will be only partially met by this allocation. According to analysts from the Connecticut Department of Higher Education, total system unmet need was reduced to \$10.3 million by this increased allocation, a reduction of 34 percent.²⁰

Several states are working to increase the affordability of community colleges.

- Arkansas established the **Arkansas Workforce Improvement Grant**, a need-based program for adults who earn slightly more than Pell grant income limits.

- Recently, allocation for this grant was increased from \$500,000 to \$3.7 million annually.²¹
- Georgia established the **Hope Scholarship for Non-Traditional Students** which pays for tuition, fees, and books. The grant program supports students without a bachelor's degree attending technical schools. Scholarships can be used for remedial courses.²²
 - Michigan established the **No Worker Left Behind** program to provide displaced or low-wage workers with two years of free tuition at any Michigan community college, university, or approved training program.²³
 - Washington established the **Opportunity Grant Program** serving community college students. Funding is available for tuition and fees plus \$1,000 per academic year for books and supplies. Students are matched with mentors from their field of interest. Each community college receives an enhancement grant of \$1,500 used for support services for each full-time student enrolled. Schools that fail to increase student outcomes lose their enhancement grant.²⁴

In 2007, Connecticut legislators created the **Connecticut Workforce Advancement Grants for Education (CT-WAGE)** program to support students enrolled at Charter Oak State College, the state's distance learning college. The initial legislative proposal included students enrolled in the Connecticut Community College system. In 2008, the community colleges sought funding to expand the program to their students, but no new funding was provided to any programs that legislative year due to the state's deficit.

CT-WAGE is based on the Women in Transition program also administered by Charter Oak. CT-WAGE provides low-income parents with the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education in career and occupational programs. Scholarships are available to participants. Access to lap tops, printers, internet access, and on-line courses, and support from a program coordinator are available to help low-wage adult students earn the academic credentials needed to increase their income. By September 2008, 43 students had been recruited; the program retention/graduation rate was 88 percent.²⁵

State Funding to Support Expanded Enrollment

Connecticut financial aid policies state that community college students taking non-credit courses—remedial or job-related—do not qualify for state financial aid.²⁶ According to Connecticut community college administrators, almost 50,000 out of almost 101,000 students enrolled in work-related or remedial courses in 2008.²⁷

State funding for student enrollment in credit courses comes from Connecticut's General Fund. Non-credit community college courses are self-supporting, meaning rather than receiving support from the state of Connecticut, community colleges rely on student paid tuition for the cost of courses. In some cases, an employer might assist with the cost of work-related studies.

A look at other states' funding of community colleges:

- Oregon has used state funding to increase access and expand enrollment. For over 40 years, the state has funded community colleges for non-credit courses at the same rate as for-credit courses. As a result, enrollment in work-related and remedial non-credit courses has been strong in the state.²⁸
- Maryland and Texas also fund non-credit courses at the same rate as credit courses.²⁹
- According to the Community College Research Center of Columbia University, more than half of states provide general funds for non-credit workforce courses.³⁰
- California and New Mexico have increased general fund support for non-credit workforce courses in the past few years, reflecting legislators' understanding of the important resource community colleges play in supporting employers' need for workforce education and skill development.³¹

Bridge Programs: Smoothing the Transition for Adult Education Students

The first step on a career path for an adult learner often is the completion of a high school degree. Students can attend local adult education programs to complete a GED (General Education Development) credential and then move on to a community college.

For many adult students, the transition from adult education to college is not easy, however. In many cases the path between the two systems is not clearly laid out. Community college administrators who understand the importance of this transition for adult learners are creating the institutional agreements and academic pathways that provide assistance in applying for college admission and financial aid, as well as transferring adult education credits.

Connecticut has established a bridge program for workforce training that supports adult education students transitioning to community colleges. The program is small in scale; 17 adult education providers of the 70 located across the state are receiving \$45,000 grants annually to establish cooperative programs with community colleges. Funding is provided by the federal Program Improvement Projects (PIP) program administered by the Connecticut State Department of Education. Under the grant program, Connecticut partnerships between adult education programs and community colleges provide academic and career-related counseling along with other student support services and assistance with admissions and financial aid applications.³²

Agreements between local adult education and community college programs focus on the particular needs of students. Some programs use the PIP grants for remedial education classes or Accuplacer³³ testing provided by the community colleges at the adult education site. Connecticut State Department of Education staff provide professional development for participating adult education teachers and convene meetings of the grantees to share challenges and successes.

In 2007 and 2008, three local adult education programs also received grants from the Nellie Mae Foundation. The foundation grants fund the alignment of adult education and community college math and language arts curricula. Once the alignments have been completed, the curricula will be made available to other adult education and community college transition programs in Connecticut.³⁴

Other states that have created bridge programs include:

- Kentucky passed legislation in 2000 uniting community colleges and adult education in an effort to improve workforce development. Students attend adult education programs for remedial classes for which they receive community college credits and financial aid. The state's goal is to increase the number of GED completers who go on to college by 40 percent by 2020.³⁵
- Illinois has created an adult education bridge program funded through the Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.³⁶ Students who complete ESL course work are able to take transitional courses that combine both language skills and occupational training in nursing assistance or health care translation.³⁷

Outreach and Public Education – Getting the Word Out to Adult Learners

Adult workers out of the educational pipeline for several years or decades may not return to school easily on their own. Many are unsure how to navigate a system that appears intimidating. Some have not been inside a school since their high school days. Outreach and public education to targeted communities of workers can break down barriers to higher education.

- As part of their effort to increase college attendance, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education began the “**Go Higher Kentucky**” media campaign to encourage Kentuckians of all ages to improve their education, especially adults between 16 and 64. Posters and post cards were produced with compelling messages. Radio spots were developed for target audiences. In 2007, the Council produced a five-point plan to improve Kentucky's economic prosperity through higher education. The goal is to increase per capita income and general fund revenue.
- ***College for All Texans***, a statewide “awareness and motivational campaign,” seeks to enroll an additional 430,000 individuals in the state's higher education system by 2015. This number is in addition to the 200,000 students anticipated to enroll based on current trends. The campaign and the state's higher education plan have won support from a broad list of stakeholders among education, business, and political leadership. Performance measures have been developed, and progress reports are generated annually.³⁸

In January 2008 Connecticut joined the national **KnowHow2Go!** multimedia, public education campaign launched the previous year in six other states (California, Illinois,

Indiana, Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Ohio) by the Lumina Foundation for Education, the American Council on Education, and the Ad Council. While this is an excellent public education project, its audience is traditional high school students who might not see postsecondary opportunities in their future. Connecticut's project could be expanded with particular strategies developed for non-traditional working adults who need work-related education and training.

Recommendations

To improve adult workers' access to community college course work, policymakers should consider the following recommendations.

1. **Affordability.** Expand Connecticut Workforce Advancement Grants for Education (CT-WAGE) to include community college students.
2. **State funding.** Provide state general fund for non-credit work-related courses and establish funding rates equivalent to for-credit courses.
3. **Bridge programs.** Expand the current transition program for adult education students applying to local community colleges with the long-term goal of all 70 adult education programs participating in the next 10 years.
4. **Outreach and public education.** Expand Connecticut's KnowHow2Go! public education campaign to include adult workers and establish enrollment goals and time lines for adult students and GED holders.

Connecticut's Skilled Labor Force and Our Community College Investment

In order for Connecticut to meet the workforce needs of business and industry, the state must be creative in developing policies and programs that include the educational needs of adult working students. As other states have increased investments in their community college systems and developed outreach and financial aid programs targeted for working adults, Connecticut policymakers must understand the range of workforce development strategies needed to make our state economically competitive. Connecticut's community colleges can play a critical role in building Connecticut's workforce of the future with forward-thinking leadership and sufficient resources.

Endnotes

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