

A Community Anchor: Student Perspectives about Career Education

Part one in the series:

A Community Anchor: Redesigning Career Education to Support Regional Economic Development

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About This Series

A Community Anchor: Redesigning Career Education to Support Regional Economic Development

The California Community Colleges (CCC) provide education and training to diverse student populations for a variety of purposes, including to prepare them for careers in today's workforce. This series of briefs revisits findings from a group of community colleges' efforts to redesign career education (CE) programs to better prepare students for shifting regional workforce needs. Given the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional economies today, what opportunities might be leveraged from the community colleges' earlier efforts to facilitate workforce development? To address this question, this series highlights the perspectives of CCC students, faculty, staff, and administrators, based on several evaluation and research projects by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) focusing on CE programs in the CCC from 2012 to 2017. The series includes three briefs that cover:

- student perspectives about career education programs,
- college personnel perspectives about program development, and
- opportunities to facilitate career education and workforce development.

We begin our series on learnings from CE opportunities in the CCC system by highlighting what students described as most helpful in contributing to their success. These CE programs were aimed at helping students find meaningful jobs and careers with family-supporting wages, aligning curriculum with industry needs, encouraging timely completion, and providing students with work-based learning opportunities. Colleges implemented a wide range of approaches to accomplish these goals, and the ones featured here were highlighted by students as important to their success. **We found that students especially valued having a consistent schedule, being part of a student cohort, having a program-specific counselor, building foundational skills, and obtaining relevant work experience while enrolled in college.** Learning from students' experiences in these programs can help colleges redesign their CE programs to better meet students' needs and support their regional economies. Students' perspectives are also relevant in the context of current reform efforts in the CCC such as Guided Pathways (GP), aimed at providing clear pathways and structured support for students.

EdInsights was an external evaluator for two CCC consortia that received grants from the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.¹ The findings in this series are based on these evaluations, as well as research conducted by EdInsights on the CE mission of the CCC, including focus groups and surveys with over 1,000 CCC students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The views expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders of the evaluation and research projects.

Key Takeaways

Students Prefer Consistent Course Schedules

Students said that they appreciated having a consistent class schedule for their program across its duration, since that allowed them to plan for their other obligations, including work and family care. For example, some programs blocked off specific days for instruction, such as having students in class on one or more weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., intending to mimic a typical workday. Other programs organized courses into several discrete blocks offered in a particular sequence (for example, offering a theory course in the first two-week block, followed by a specific content course in the next block). This sequencing provided students who did not complete specific aspects of the course with the opportunity to retake only those sections, rather than the full semester-long course. Another program enabled students to enroll in all classes for the entire year, rather than only for the upcoming semester. These strategies provided predictability and consistency for students.

“[You’re] able to plan out what you need to do. [It] gives you more preparation for the year...It’s also good because it takes off some of the stress... You just have to go to your classes, you’re registered. You’re ready.” —CCC student

Students Benefit from Being Part of a Cohort with Their Peers

Students appreciated participating in a cohort model—that is, enrolling as part of a defined group of students who communicated with each other and progressed through the program together. Being part of a cohort, they said, provided them with a sense of community, consistency, and support. In particular, students described benefits in learning from the diverse knowledge and experiences of their peers, having automatic study groups, and having a resource of peers whom they could ask for help with course material.

“As far as us being in one large cohort...we’re moving together with each other...It kind of creates a good support system. You get to know each other.” —CCC student

Students Find it Helpful to Have a Program-specific Counselor

A key strategy of the CE programs we studied was providing students with counselors who were assigned and designated to the program. These counselors were able to outline program requirements and expectations for students, refer students to on-campus resources, and meet regularly with students, staff, and faculty members to track and discuss student progress. Often, these counselors were also located in the same building where students took their coursework, making their services more accessible. Students said that having a counselor dedicated to their program was useful in providing them with access to consistent and reliable information about their program and career opportunities.

“I have friends that go here [for other programs] and they say it is hard to know where to go and who to ask [for counseling information]. I have it better because I have someone to go to.” —CCC student

Students Want to Build Foundational Skills

Students said that a key benefit of their CE program involved the ability to build foundational skills and otherwise explore what it meant to work in their prospective field. Some of the programs we studied were designed to provide students with a foundational set of courses that could lead to multiple program pathways within the same field. For example, students could build specific skill sets and accumulate a series of “stackable” credentials through which they could progress up a career ladder in a specific field. Students in some programs also had the opportunity to earn “digital badges” that certified their mastery of content knowledge and core competencies for their field. Students appreciated these kinds of opportunities and described them as advantageous on the job market.

“This [program] makes you more competitive in relation to others. The digital badges give you something extra. We get job postings for positions that usually require more training, but because we have similar training within these classes, we’re able to bypass that, and they know they can count on students from this program specifically. And it’s nice to have something to fall back on in case medical school doesn’t happen, or if I want a job from now until then.”—CCC student

Students Want Work-based Learning Opportunities

Students praised the alignment between program curriculum and industry needs and found it valuable that their coursework prepared them for employment. In addition to applied coursework, students also engaged in field work, internships, externships, or clinical placements as part of their CE program. Students recalled that these experiential learning opportunities gave them exposure to a variety of career options, helped them apply their program knowledge, prepared them with workplace readiness and soft skills, and showcased their skills to potential employers. Some said that these experiences gave them an advantage in the job market.

“We’ll be a step ahead of other people applying for entry-level positions because we have...much more experience, and we have support from the community to help us, [such as] with interviews, building a resume, [and] getting digital badges.”—CCC student

Implications

Students’ experiences and feedback from our evaluations can inform how colleges approach program development. This is especially pertinent in our current context as community colleges are critical to providing Californians with education and training to address economic recovery and workforce development.² This is evidenced by the U.S. Department of Education’s announcement of Reimagining Workforce Preparation Grants, aimed at helping states with a higher COVID-19 burden create career pathways programs for displaced workers.³

Students also highlighted program strategies that align with the GP framework, which has been a major focus across the CCC.⁴ In redesigning colleges to become more student-centered, faculty, staff, and administrators can evaluate whether their programs:

- provide a clear sense of direction and connection to career opportunities;
- build course schedules based on student needs;
- foster a sense of community and belonging;
- offer access to program-specific support services; and
- provide a foundational set of skills for students to pursue various career options within a particular field.

Reflection Questions

If you work at a college and wish to start conversations about updating your CE programs, we offer the following reflection questions:

- To what extent do programs at my college encapsulate the strategies described in this brief?
- Which strategies can we incorporate into our programs while working within our current budget? What conditions need to be in place to facilitate the change?
- How do these strategies align with or inform my college's GP efforts?
- What do students in my programs find helpful? How do we collect this information?

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Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Labor (n.d.). *Trade adjustment assistance community college and career training*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/tradeact/community-colleges>

² Opportunity America Working Group on Community College Workforce Education (2020). *The indispensable institution: Reimagining community college*. Washington, DC: Opportunity America.

³ U.S. Department of Education (2020, April 27). *Secretary DeVos launches new grant competition to spark student-centered, agile learning opportunities to support recovery from national emergency*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/secretary-devos-launches-new-grant-competition-spark-student-centered-agile-learning-opportunities-support-recovery-national-emergency>

⁴ Jenkins, D., Lahr, H., Brown, A.E. & Mazzariello, A. (2019). *Redesigning your college through Guided Pathways: Lessons on managing whole-college reform from the AACC Pathways Project*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.

