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ABSTRACT

High public expectations of the educational and workforce development systems are the force behind the shifting roles of education and training and efforts to create more coherent and effective systems of work force preparation. The result of pulling and tugging by citizens, policymakers, and educators is a system of widespread access, considerable transparency, and variation. Like the federal government, states have a plethora of programs, some state initiated and funded, others largely federal. Complaints about the system of federal and state programs--some justified, others exaggerated--are as follows: limited information, inadequate access, inefficiency, and duplication; barriers to local system coordination embedded in the basic purposes and structure of different programs; and suspect program effectiveness. States have become increasingly active in defining and coordinating their work force development programs through the dominant state strategy and institutional and market-like mechanisms. At the local level, one-stop centers and Workforce Investment Councils have been created. Although the Workforce Investment Act should enhance development of coherent systems, greater reliance on Individual Training Accounts may undermine it. Strong community colleges have become the linchpin of state systems. In a coherent system, education and training could learn from each other and provide more comprehensive and effective services; some outcomes are possible only within an integrated system. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

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centerpoint

what we've learned...where we're going

From Isolation to Integration: Occupational Education and the Emerging Systems of Workforce Development

W. NORTON GRUBB

*What do we, as citizens and employees, policy-makers and employers, want of our educational and workforce development systems? We clearly want a great deal, since we continue to expand and elaborate education and training, trying various reforms every few years. So there is not a single answer to the question of what we want, as shifts in federal and state legislation reveal. Nor is there, in a diverse and pluralist society, a single voice or constituency that can frame the answers by itself. However, examining these debates, and their influences on the education and training provided our citizens, is crucial to understanding our ambitions for education and training, and to understanding the particular role of vocational education within a larger complex of programs. Over the past decade, the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) has conducted a series of studies that examine the shifting roles of education and training and the efforts to create more coherent and effective "systems" of workforce preparation. This *CenterPoint* summarizes that research.*

tion developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The term education has usually encompassed a variety of intellectual, political, and moral goals as well as relatively broad conceptions of occupational preparation. The resulting complex of schools, colleges, and universities, larger than in any other country, is marked by substantial regularity. Specific institutions—high schools, for example, or community colleges—have many similar characteristics across the country. There are well-established patterns of progression, from elementary school to middle school and high school, through various kinds of colleges to post-graduate study. Much of the funding for this system is public, even at the post-compulsory level, since access has been a persistent concern. The process of developing our educational system has been complex, with local institutions starting and stopping, fifty states developing their own approaches, and the federal government providing much smaller amounts than states do of support and direction. But the result of pulling and tugging by millions of citizens, policy-makers, and educators is a system of widespread access, considerable transparency, and variation within well-known limits.

What do we, as citizens and employees, policy-makers and employers, want of our educational and workforce development systems?

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Background



Education

In the United States, an imposing system of public and private educa-



Workforce Development

Over a considerably shorter period of time—little more than three decades—a different system of

Providers of vocational education, particularly community colleges and technical institutes, are virtually the only programs that participate in both education and workforce development.

workforce development has begun to emerge in much the same way, from federal and state support, local experimentation, and considerable wrangling about the results. In contrast to the broader goals of education, this system has emphasized occupational preparation, though such preparation may range from broad programs encompassing many occupations to narrowly job-specific or employer-specific training. It includes postsecondary vocational education, certain aspects of adult education, short-term job training programs (including some for particular populations, like dislocated workers or welfare recipients), private providers of training, and upgrade training for the existing workforce, often provided by employers themselves. While there is considerable overlap in the education and training these programs provide, and the students or clients they serve, this “system” is not as settled as formal education has become. Its institutions and programs are more fluid and varied, and the linkages among programs are largely undeveloped. Its boundaries are murky and its effects are much less clear. The variations among states and localities are even more substantial than they are in the education system. Differences are shaped by the balance of state and local authority, political proclivities, economic conditions and population characteristics. In many states a “system” is emerging, but many issues remain unknown or unresolved that have been effectively decided in the education system (for example, the scope and equity of access, the nature and quality of specific programs, the patterns of mobility among programs, and the effectiveness for participants and employers). And the process of reform is uneven and slow; as a policy-maker in Oklahoma described the process, “You can’t eat an elephant in one bite.”



Vocational Education

Providers of vocational education, particularly community colleges and technical institutes, are virtually the only programs that participate in both education and workforce development. Therefore, vocational education has the potential to bridge “education” and “training,” providing a route from short-term programs back into the

mainstream of education. In some states community colleges and technical institutes are central to all of workforce development, and in a few localities they are “the only game in town.” And the practices developed in the most progressive occupational programs can provide examples for other programs to emulate, potentially improving the effectiveness of the entire “system.” But where community colleges and other providers of vocational and adult education have failed to participate in state discussions about workforce development, the cleavage between “education” and “training” has persisted—to the detriment of all.



The Growth of the Elephant: The Plethora of Programs

The programs included in *workforce development* provide individuals with the competencies necessary for employment—including technical skills, basic academic competencies in remedial and adult education, skills like problem-solving, communications, and teamwork (often called SCANS skills), and “soft” skills like motivation, reliability, and the ability to work with others. A conventional history starts with the manpower programs established by the federal government in the early 1960s, to combat technological unemployment and poverty. Setting a pattern that has complicated the “system” ever since, the early manpower programs viewed schools and colleges as inappropriate to provide short, job-specific training for individuals who had not done well in their schooling. Services were therefore provided outside the educational system, particularly by community-based organizations, creating the distinction between “education” and “training.” Despite some overlap, *training* generally refers to shorter and more job-specific programs, open only to specific groups with particular needs, providing a variety of services (including work experience, job search assistance, and support services) in addition to classroom instruction, offered in a bewildering variety of settings, and focusing solely on occupational goals rather than the broader purposes of education.

One strand of development includes the elaboration of job training programs, which were consolidated and reformed first in the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973, then in the Job Training Partnership Act of 1981, and most recently in the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. Another strand has focused on welfare recipients, first articulated in the “services strategy” of the 1960s to enable welfare recipients to find employment, and expanded in various welfare-to-work programs developed during the 1980s. Most recently the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 has imposed on states new requirements to move individuals off welfare, reinforcing a strategy of “work first,” or placing individuals into employment rather than education or training. Over time, federal legislation has tended to expand the particular groups eligible for short-term job training to include such groups as dislocated workers unemployed because of sectoral shifts, food stamp recipients, those injured on the job and needing vocational rehabilitation, veterans, and a variety of others. And throughout these developments in job training, the federal government has slowly expanded support for adult education as well, providing remedial education and English as a Second Language (ESL). As a result, a confusing array of employment and training programs exist. In 1995 the General Accounting Office counted 163 federal programs spending \$20.4 billion. The report *America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* described the problem in these words:

The network of public training activities in this country has thus been created as a result of unrelated education, social, and economic development goals rather than from any overall vision of human resource development. The result is a crazy quilt of competing and overlapping policies and programs, with no coherent system of standardization or information exchange services on which various providers and agencies can rely.

At the same time as federal developments have driven the “system,” states have elaborated their own programs. Area vocational schools, community colleges and technical institutes and adult education have expanded substantially since the 1960s—particularly community colleges. Almost every state has

enacted programs supporting training in order to stimulate economic development, often by subsidizing training within firms. Like the federal government, then, states have found themselves with a plethora of programs, some state-initiated and funded, others largely federal.



Complaints about the “System”: Rhetoric and Reality



Duplication Overstated

As federal and state policy-makers have contemplated what they have wrought, similar complaints have emerged over nearly thirty years. Many programs provide similar services—for example, secretarial, computer-related, and electronics programs are provided by job training and welfare-related programs as well as community colleges and area vocational schools, and remedial education exists in community colleges, adult education, and learning labs sponsored by job training. Because most programs have been independent of one another, progress from one to another—for example, from adult education for remedial purposes into job training for technical skills, or from a basic computer skills course into a more advanced program providing access to better-paid jobs—has been left to the initiative of students. From the perspective of students and employers, the variety of programs has made it difficult to know which programs are available, which are most effective, and where the most reliable employees might be found. And so charges of limited information, inadequate access, inefficiency and duplication have proliferated.

While many of these concerns are justified, in other cases they seem exaggerated. Contrary to conventional wisdom, there are remarkably few cases of outright duplication. One reason is that programs vary in their services, with vocational programs concentrating on longer-term certificate and Associate programs while JTPA and welfare programs emphasize short-term training, on-the-job training (often a wage subsidy rather than real training), and job search assistance.

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Programs also vary in the individuals they serve, with job training and welfare-to-work programs serving more disadvantaged individuals than community colleges, and customized training offering training to individuals already employed. An overall shortage of resources means that there is generally more demand than existing programs can supply.



Local System Coordination

Most communities also have “systems” of education and training in the sense that many services are available. Virtually every community has a continuum of remediation programs leading to the GED (within adult education), or college-level courses (within community colleges), a variety of job-specific training from short-term entry-level programs in area vocational schools and community-based organizations to two-year Associate programs in well-paid fields, and ancillary services like job search assistance and placement services.

Again contrary to convention, at the local level there is often considerable coordination. In most communities there is a “system” in the sense that administrators of every program are familiar with others, and extensive referral and contracting among programs takes place. In the most typical pattern, for example, secondary and post-secondary vocational programs are linked by articulation agreements and 2+2 plans; JTPA and welfare-to-work programs subcontract with community colleges to provide some (though not all) of their training and remediation, with adult schools usually providing the lion’s share of remediation; and community colleges provide customized training with their own resources as well as funds from state economic development efforts. Such coordination—which can be described as collaborative service delivery—has in the past been the result of local initiatives rather than of federal requirements or state policies for collaborative planning.

The motives for local collaboration vary, but they include:

- cost-shifting, where programs with limited funding (especially JTPA and welfare programs) refer clients and thereby shift costs to community

colleges and adult schools with enrollment-based, open-ended funding

- the general dislike of competition and a pervasive feeling that cooperation will increase total resources
- the search by most programs for distinct niches where they need not compete with others
- local brokers (including coordination councils, Chambers of Commerce, other business groups, and sometimes Private Industry Councils) which serve to link different programs.

In other communities, different patterns of coordination emerge. In one pattern, education programs coordinate with one another, particularly through articulation agreements, and various job training programs have cooperated with one another; but a cleavage persists between “education” on the one hand and “training” on the other. Another pattern emerges in the few communities in which the community college is “the only game in town.” In this situation, the community college may provide not only occupational education of various duration but also adult education, the majority of job training (sometimes in collaboration with community-based organizations), a variety of economic development efforts, and services to employers as well. And of course a few communities—a very few, it appears—have a series of local programs that are hostile to one another and independent in all respects, where there seems to have been a mutual agreement not to infringe on the territory of others.

Where coordination fails to take place, the barriers include:

- differences in the choice of services offered, particularly where JTPA and welfare programs have concentrated on job search assistance and on-the-job training rather than more intensive training
- dissatisfaction with particular providers, especially in communities where the community college is viewed as too “academic” and rigid in its offerings
- JTPA performance standards, which have discouraged some educational institutions from competing for contracts

- local politics, which dictates the allocation of JTPA resources in some communities.

These barriers are not the kind that can be overcome by federal or state coordination mandates. They are more fundamental, embedded in the basic purposes and structure of different programs.



Information Underload

It's difficult to judge whether there's a lot of coordination or too little.

There is certainly more than the conventional wisdom claims and there is great variation among communities. Still, the dominant view is that the existing "systems" are still not coherent enough. One dominant problem is that there are very few mechanisms following individuals, helping them make transitions among programs, providing them assistance if they falter, or giving them information about the alternatives available. As a result, referral among programs—e.g., from JTPA to adult education, or from a welfare program to a community college—is likely to result in individuals becoming "lost," rather than being an effective method of cooperation. For example, one welfare administrator lamented sending clients to "the black hole of adult basic education," since the lack of tracking mechanisms meant that the program (like most others) never knew whether the individual arrived at the remedial program, completed the program, made it back into job skills training, completed training, and finally managed to find stable employment.

The lack of adequate tracking mechanisms (and then supportive services) is symptomatic of another problem in local "systems": the lack of information. Aside from figures on enrollments required for funding, few programs collect data on dimensions of performance like the progress of individuals through various services, completion rates, subsequent employment, and long-term earnings. There is substantial agreement that dropout rates from all programs are high. However, few programs collect such information, and JTPA subcontractors often fudge the numbers so true completion rates cannot be calculated. Community colleges often reinterpret low completion rates as evidence that their students have gotten related employment, without knowing anything about what their students do when they leave—effectively

defining away the problem. Results on subsequent employment and earnings are even harder to find, particularly for individual programs. Even in JTPA, which is conventionally thought to be outcome-oriented because of its performance standards, local programs tend to be *performance-driven* but not outcome-oriented. They often "play to the indicators," concerned with meeting specific performance targets (like short-term placement), but ignorant about other dimensions of success (like long-term mobility).

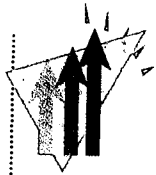


Program Effectiveness

Finally, the effectiveness of many programs has been suspect. Sophisticated evaluations reveal that short-term job training tends to increase earnings by trivial amounts—on the average by \$200 to \$500 per year—and that even these benefits decline over four to five years (Grubb, 1996b). Most welfare-to-work programs have failed to move many welfare recipients into independent employment, and the results for the most disadvantaged participants are especially disheartening. The periods of time most individuals enroll in adult education are too short to make much difference, the rates of non-completion from community colleges have been much too high, and the proportion of completers who find related employment is quite low in many occupational areas. In economic development, the dominant approach of "smokestack chasing"—trying to lure industry from neighboring states with various tax and training incentives—is rarely effective. Many training efforts funded in the name of economic development provide public subsidies for training that employers would otherwise fund themselves. In effect, the overriding concern with duplication and waste, the focus on specific program requirements, and the lack of information and evaluation have led to "systems" with remarkably little attention to effectiveness. And so various efforts to improve the quality of programs have emerged: performance standards, required first in JTPA and now spreading to other programs (particularly in the 1998 Amendments to the Carl Perkins Act and in the Workforce Development Act); the development of state data systems to improve information about outcomes; and even performance-based funding, first being tried in Florida.

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Since the late 1980s, however, states have become increasingly active in defining and coordinating their workforce development programs . . .



Progress in the States



From Local to State Epicenters

Ten years ago, most successful efforts at coordination were local. Where they occurred, they happened because local providers saw it as in their interests to cooperate with one another, either to stretch resources, to provide more effective or more comprehensive services, or to avoid the kind of destructive competition that makes life unstable and unpleasant. Since the late 1980s, however, states have become increasingly active in defining and coordinating their workforce development programs, sometimes in response to state economic problems, sometimes in recognition that the plethora of programs was unwieldy and ineffective, and sometimes in anticipation of federal consolidation of its funding—a possibility that emerged in 1996 but was never enacted. At least in the most active states, such efforts are beginning to have real effects.

THE DOMINANT STATE STRATEGY

The dominant state strategy is simply described, though it has many variants. A state agency—often called a Workforce Development (or Investment) Board—is created with a certain set of statewide responsibilities, usually for planning and oversight of education and training programs, sometimes with administrative responsibilities as well. Then—because state offices can rarely be in touch with local conditions—local or regional counterparts are established with responsibility for implementing state policy. The kinds of programs included in these state initiatives vary: they almost always include job training and welfare to work, as well as recent initiatives like school-to-work programs and one-stop centers; they sometimes include state economic development activities. In some states vocational education and adult education are also included, while in other cases they have been left out, sometimes because they have fought politically not to be included. Some state councils are advisory, though they can be quite powerful if they have the attention

of the governor; others have administrative powers, and can therefore make funding decisions that force collaboration and consolidation—though whether they do so depends on state politics, administrative structure, and the balance of state and local power. Michigan has taken a novel approach in designating three tiers of programs, with different kinds of coordination: Tier One programs are under the control of local Workforce Development Boards; for Tier Two programs local boards have planning but not administrative authority; and for Tier Three programs local boards are supposed to use their influence to coordinate. The three tiers therefore reflect a continuum of local influence over different programs.

INSTITUTIONAL VERSUS MARKET MECHANISMS

States have used a variety of other instruments to reform workforce development. Some have stressed institutional mechanisms of change—efforts to improve the quality of programs and the connections among them, including required advisory committees, technical assistance to local programs, and (particularly in the largely voluntary efforts in Oklahoma and Oregon) cultural changes, shifting away from the traditional state role of funding and regulation to one of state leadership with local responsibility. Other states—particularly Florida and Texas—have adopted market-like mechanisms. Performance measures and standards to emphasize outcomes over inputs are one widespread reform; Florida is moving toward performance-based funding, where 15 percent of funds for various education and training providers will be based on completion of credentials and job placement rates. Increased competition among providers, the required subcontracting of services, and the creation of vouchers to enhance consumer choice are others instruments which are being used in varying ways in the states.

THE BUMPY ROAD OF STATE-LEVEL DEVELOPMENTS

Of course, the state-level developments have not been smooth and easy. Some states, like Oregon, North Carolina, and Florida, have stuck to a basic strategy over relatively long periods of time, with bipartisan support,

and they have made the most progress. But in other states (like Massachusetts and Maryland), changes in administrations have brought in governors with very different political agendas, reversing earlier progress in coordination programs. In other cases (notably Wisconsin and Michigan), a focus on welfare reform and “work first”—the philosophy of emphasizing immediate employment as the best route to economic independence—have undermined efforts to further develop education and training programs, as well as alienating employers from state reforms. One local Texas administrator complained that “the biggest complaint [from employers] has been that [the state agency] sends people without a lot of skills,” and another at a local one-stop center noted the conflict between state policy and local responsibility:

I don't think that [work first] is doing a service to the employer or to the individual... And if I had that attitude of not wanting to seek retention on the job, I would lose the employers who are the customers of the center—and I can't afford to lose them. The board will fire [us] if we're just throwing... bodies at employers.

In addition, resistance from some providers, particularly adult education, and inconsistency in state decisions have presented other problems to local efforts at coordination. On the whole, however, many states have become more active in developing their workforce development systems.



Local Initiatives

ONE-STOP CENTERS

At the local level, an important trend has been the creation of one-stop centers, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. In some states, these centers provide information to prospective students (and to employers) about the programs available locally. In other cases, they have moved beyond the provision of information to career-oriented counseling and help in enrollment. Sometimes different programs maintain offices co-located at the one-stop center, so that applicants can get more detailed information from providers; in

these cases one-stop centers have become a single point of entry into the workforce development system. Sometimes the process of creating one-stop centers, or co-location, has caused local programs to engage in more extensive cooperation in the provision of services. As a local official in Michigan noted,

No Wrong Door [the one-stop center] is really forcing us all to sit down at the table and figure out how we can maintain a system and still provide what we think are essential services to a universal population with reduced budgets.

LOCAL WORKFORCE INVESTMENT COUNCILS

In addition, the creation of local Workforce Investment Councils has provided a mechanism of planning and oversight, though the powers and scope of these Councils vary from state to state. By far the most common approach has been that which some state officials describe as “centrally guided, locally directed” efforts, where states create overall goals and local Councils direct their implementation. This approach tends to avoid mandates, recognizing that local autonomy is both necessary to serve local labor markets and politically unavoidable. Inevitably, however, this strategy has resulted in uneven coordination among regions: some resist state guidance and complain that the state is trying to pressure them into compliance, while others want to move faster than the state and complain that the state has not done more to remove barriers to coordination. But what seems to be happening, in the fitful way typical of American federalism, is that the entire structure of state and local efforts is lurching in the direction of greater coordination.



The Checkered Role of the Federal Government

The problem of proliferating education and training programs, with inconsistent purposes and regulations, has to some extent been a problem of federal policy. In response, federal legislation has incorporated small measures to improve coordination, ranging from mandatory planning activities to JTPA funds earmarked

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for coordination to encouragement of state consolidation. In 1996, proposed federal legislation would have combined federal funding for vocational education, adult education, and job training, allowing states to create truly unified systems of education and training. However, this radical consolidation legislation did not pass; the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) that did pass, in August 1998, has maintained separate funding for job training and adult education, with vocational education funded in still other legislation.



WIA: Enhancement of Coherent Systems

With one important exception, the new Act should enhance the development of coherent systems. It continues the state-local structure that many states have already adopted, with a state Workforce Investment Board required to develop a five-year plan, and local Workforce Investment Boards responsible for planning and overseeing local programs. It encourages states to submit unified plans for up to 14 federal programs, in order to ensure their coordination and avoid duplication of workforce development activities. The Act strengthens the role of one-stop centers, principally by establishing them as the access point for employment-related training and other services. It appears to place less emphasis on federal rules and regulations, authorizing them only to the extent necessary and extending eligibility for comprehensive waivers to all states (rather than just six). Since federal regulations and uncertainty about their interpretation have been barriers to state and local coordination, this should also facilitate the development of more coherent workforce development systems.

In addition, the Act provides further incentives to improve the quality of programs, particularly by requiring indicators of performance and establishing incentive grants starting in the year 2000 to states with above-average performance. Since the low quality and unresponsiveness of programs is one factor preventing their coordination with others—for example, in the reluctance of many providers to refer to adult education—the improvement of quality should enhance the willingness of programs to work with one another.



WIA: Coherent Systems Undermined?

However, the WIA places new emphasis on Individual Training Accounts (ITAs), in which participants choose among providers, and it de-emphasizes the provision of training through contracts with specific providers. But when *individuals* are the principal decision-makers, rather than program *administrators*, they may or may not decide to enroll in programs that are well-coordinated with others. Consumer “choice” may be influenced by many factors (like proximity and convenience) other than the quality of programs, the comprehensiveness of services, and the links to other providers. The development of coherent systems of workforce development programs may therefore be undermined by greater reliance on this voucher-like approach. The Workforce Investment Act is therefore somewhat ambiguous in its influences, and it will no doubt take some time for its effects to become known.



The Potential Role of Vocational Education



Strong Versus Weak Community Colleges

In the uneven development of workforce development systems, vocational education (community colleges and some area vocational centers in particular) has played various roles. Even in the absence of active state policy, community colleges have often served as contractors to job training and welfare programs, providing assessment, remedial education, and occupational programs of varying length. In some communities the community colleges has been the “only game in town,” providing virtually all education and training services, and in a few states community colleges have administered JTPA, adult education, and economic development programs. But where community colleges are perceived as weak, or “academic,” or inflexible in their schedules, their participation has been limited.

The same patterns hold as states have become more active in coordinating workforce development systems. In states like North Carolina, Oregon, and Oklahoma, where community colleges have strong reputations and occupational programs well-connected to employers, they have become the linchpins of state systems: they provide a variety of education and training as well as economic development activities, and they are often central to the planning of local Workforce Investment Councils. In some states community colleges are actively participating in efforts to develop programs for welfare recipients under the new federal welfare legislation. However, in states with weaker community colleges, or where they have not participated in early discussions, they have often been left out of state coordination efforts. As one observer complained about community colleges, "they always come to the table as vendors, never as partners," wanting more resources but unwilling to modify their practices. Often they have an independent governance structure so that they can remain independent if they want to. Where this occurs, the continued separation of education from training means that the majority of funding in workforce development efforts remains outside state reforms.



Education and Training Learning From Each Other

LESSONS FROM EDUCATION FOR JOB TRAINING

But the more serious problem of the continuing division is that, in a coherent system, programs could learn from one another and provide more comprehensive and effective services. For example, many training and welfare-to-work programs are forced to provide remedial education, usually in poorly designed programs with low-quality teaching based on "skills and drills." Efforts in some community colleges to teach remedial education in learning communities, where basic skills are taught in the context of occupational courses, provide a more effective approach. Likewise, the efforts to integrate academic and vocational education, developed in high schools and community colleges with the support of fed-

eral funds, provide more powerful ways of teaching the multiple competencies called for by many employers and commissions (including the SCANS Commission). These practices could be adopted in many job training programs as well. A few colleges have developed strong links between school-based and work-based learning, through co-operative education, school-to-work programs, and school-based enterprises, providing yet another model for others to follow. And the best community colleges pride themselves on being "teaching institutions." They use a variety of institutional policies to enhance the quality of teaching, a dimension that is almost completely missing from job training, welfare-related, and adult education programs.

LESSONS FROM JOB TRAINING FOR EDUCATION

Conversely, education providers have much to learn from job training. Community colleges often have lax placement efforts and weak connections with local employers. They could learn from job training programs that have placed greater emphasis on targeting efforts on the most promising employment, and on finding jobs as well as preparing their clients for them. Education providers could also learn from job training and adult education about flexible and unconventional scheduling, since they are often criticized for being wedded to rigid academic calendars.



Outcomes Only Integrated Systems Can Provide

Furthermore, there are some outcomes that are possible only within an integrated system. The small benefits of short-term job training programs are due in part to the low intensity of services (since most last only 10 to 15 weeks) and the provision of a limited range of services to individuals with multiple barriers to employment. In the absence of substantial funding increases, these problems cannot be resolved without linking existing programs together. For example, programs of increasing complexity could be connected in "ladders" of opportunity, with

In a coherent system, programs could learn from one another and provide more comprehensive and effective services.

an individual attending one or two short job training programs and then, as time and employment demands permit, transferring into related certificate and Associate degree programs in community colleges or technical institutes. This vision specifies a particularly crucial role for community colleges and technical institutes as the “bridges” between short-term training programs and the mainstream educational system. The cooperation among different programs (including those providing non-educational services like child care and health care) is a solution to the need for more comprehensive services. These reforms, which rely on existing institutions rather than creating new ones, require that all providers be better integrated.

What remains to be seen is whether this vision of coherent workforce development systems will be implemented in the coming years. Certainly the most active states are now moving in this direction, with some (checkered) help from federal policy. In many others, the standard complaints about the existing system—about duplication and waste, ineffectiveness and murkiness—have created pressures in the same direction. Historically, Americans have been fond of system-building, evidently because the benefits outweigh the costs of uniformity and potential rigidity. In such a world it makes no sense for any programs, including occupational education, to continue working in lonely isolation.

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