

A Community Anchor: College Personnel Perspectives about Developing and Implementing Career Education Programs

Part two 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 \(CCC\)](#) provides 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.

This second brief on learnings from CE opportunities in the CCC focuses on what college personnel described as barriers to designing and implementing programs with features that students find helpful, as described in the [first brief](#) of this series (e.g., cohorts, consistent course schedules, work-based learning opportunities). **We found that faculty, staff, and administrators encountered a common set of challenges when implementing changes to their CE programs, including: difficulty with garnering support from various constituency groups; struggles with setting realistic goals; lack of professional learning opportunities; capacity constraints; bureaucratic approval processes; and difficulty engaging employer partners.** Learning from college personnel's experiences can help colleges prepare for barriers and avoid pitfalls while redesigning their programs to better meet students' needs. Their perspectives are also relevant in the context of current efforts by the U.S. Department of Education to issue grants meant to expand short-term and work-based learning programs to address workforce needs and to revitalize the economy.¹

EdInsights was an external evaluator for two consortia of California community colleges that received grants from the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.² 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

College Personnel had Difficulty Garnering Support from Various Constituency Groups

College personnel shared that they had difficulty garnering support from various constituency groups for implementing new strategies within their programs. They said that support for change is always a challenge, especially when it entails changing long-standing policies and practices at a college or modifying people's roles and responsibilities. Several factors can contribute to resistance and a culture of inertia including a lack of understanding of the purpose and goals of new program strategies, lack of awareness or acceptance that current strategies are not working, and insufficient access to and understanding of outcomes data to inform program efficacy.

“For all the colleges, no one wanted to change their programs. We pushed faculty to find some programmatic things to change that would be built in and be sustainable. So we focused on industry certifications as a means of standardizing—at least each program would have to focus its curriculum on teaching to those standards. We focused on finding online resources, tried to help faculty find some things that would be useful for their programs, so it would come from them. Getting [support] from faculty was a lengthy process, an on-going effort.” —College personnel

College Personnel Cited Challenges with Setting Realistic Program Goals

We heard from college personnel that they struggled with setting realistic program goals and target outcomes. They shared that their college had set overly ambitious goals for their programs, especially since these programs were funded through grants. Many worried that they had set unrealistic targets for student enrollment, completion, and employment outcomes for their programs in an effort to submit a competitive grant proposal. For example, colleges sometimes had to recruit recent high school graduates, or even currently enrolled high school students, into their programs in order to generate the target enrollment numbers, even though the TAACCCT grant program was aimed at retraining displaced workers, particularly those affected by national trade policies.

“[The] expectation was 100% of students who complete the program get employed, but we find that students aren't interested in that. Off the top of my head, I'd say 50% of the people taking [grant-funded] classes are not motivated to pursue employment right now; they're focused on their education.” —College personnel

“How can you be expected to have the same number of completers as enrolled? Usually there's attrition, and that wasn't accounted for in the numbers.” —College personnel

College Personnel Lacked Opportunities to Learn how to Implement Changes

College personnel said that they lacked sufficient professional learning opportunities to adequately prepare them for the design and implementation process for new CE programs. Oftentimes, program implementation required new instructional techniques and/or student support strategies. However, faculty and staff could not make changes to pedagogy and work processes without additional training. College personnel said that professional learning needed to be set as a priority during the CE program design process. Embedding professional learning opportunities also builds broad awareness, support, and engagement for program implementation and sustainability.

“We don't have professional development or learning written anywhere in this grant, but we're expecting faculty to make huge changes and shifts in their thinking...we can't do that without professional learning and I don't think it was given the prominence that it needed to have so that faculty would definitely give it a priority.” —College personnel

Colleges Experienced Significant Capacity Constraints

College personnel cited the lack of capacity (e.g., time, resources, bandwidth) as a major challenge to program design and implementation. For example, there were significant hiring delays coupled with lengthy hiring and onboarding processes. Many programs relied heavily on part-time instructors, but they did not have the time and training to fully participate in the program implementation process, nor the authority to engage in program review as that was within the purview of full-time faculty. There were also issues with existing compensation structures that made it challenging to buy out college personnel's time to work on these efforts.

"[It] was really problematic to get on board one year into the grant. The processes in our colleges are so slow! Hiring, budgets, etc. It has been a challenge and a monster." —College personnel

"It is difficult because everybody has a lot on their plate. And we're adding more things...I think people are overwhelmed, they're burned out, they're trying to do a lot of different things." —College personnel

College Personnel Hampered by Bureaucracy of Approval Processes

College personnel expressed their frustration with the multiple layers of institutional, district, and state policies and procedures that posed significant barriers to making program changes in a timely manner. New programs and changes to existing programs had to go through several lengthy review and approval processes—this was especially challenging for colleges working as part of a regional consortium to streamline and align their curriculum and/or programs. Some programs or coursework could not be condensed because of training hours regulated by the state's licensing boards. Since these CE programs were grant-funded, college personnel also noted that federal reporting requirements were complicated and federal agencies were slow to respond to requests.

"We figured out early on that a common curriculum across colleges wasn't something we could get done given the time. It makes total sense to do but we just knew it wasn't something we could take on, [given the different] curriculum committees, teachers' unions, etc." —College personnel

"It's approved by the college through three different committees. So, that's approved. Then, from there, it goes to the district. And then from the district it goes to the...regional consortium. And then, from there, it goes to the state Chancellor's Office." —College personnel

College Personnel Described Obstacles with Engaging Employer Partners

We heard from college personnel that it was challenging to cultivate partnerships with local employers in order to provide the work-based learning opportunities students want and support them in finding employment after program completion. It was a time-intensive process to reach out to employers and industry partners individually. At times, colleges within the same region were competing with each other for limited work-based placement opportunities or internships for their students, as well as job openings for their graduates. Some colleges hired a dedicated "job developer" to foster employer engagement but these efforts were typically not sustainable since the positions were largely grant-funded. Given the slow economic recovery at the time, college personnel were also concerned with saturating the regional labor market and had insufficient data to understand how programs could best address the needs of the regional economy.

"We would have liked to have more job fairs or get more employers involved on our campus, but it was very difficult and challenging getting the [employers] involved." —College personnel

Implications

Faculty, staff, and administrators' experiences and feedback from our evaluations can inform colleges' plans for developing and implementing programs that incorporate features students find helpful and that respond to the needs of their local economies. This is especially pertinent in the current context as the U.S. Department of Education is distributing Reimagining Workforce Education Grants to expand short-term and work-based learning programs to help current students and displaced workers get back to work and reinvigorate the economy. Some higher education experts suggest that these funds would be ideal for building capacity in CE programs within the community colleges.³

In addition, college personnel in our evaluations highlighted challenges that were similar to learnings from other TAACCCT grantees.⁴ It is important to keep these experiences in mind as the CCC thinks about how to tailor CE programs to address the needs of the current economic landscape.

Reflection Questions

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

- What challenges do various constituency groups at my college encounter when redesigning programs? How do we collect this information?
- What can my college do to:
 - build awareness and support across constituency groups at the college?
 - set intentional and realistic goals, expectations, and timelines during the program design process?
 - support college personnel in professional learning?
 - address capacity constraints?
 - streamline approval processes?
 - foster engagement with employer and industry partners while considering the overall interests and needs of students, colleges, and employers in the region?

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Endnotes

¹ 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>

² 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>

³ Burke, L. (2020, May 12) *Reimagining career education*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/12/education-departments-new-120-million-grants-short-term-career-programs>

⁴ Person, A. E., Goble, L., Bruch, J., & Mazeika, J. (2015). *Implementation of competency-based education in community colleges: Findings from the evaluation of a TAACCCT grant*. Oakland, CA: Mathematica Policy Institute.



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