

CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EMERGING SKILLS SHORTAGE AND INEQUITY IN THE WORKFORCE

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American higher education is called upon to serve a variety of purposes: advancement of knowledge, expansion of cultural appreciation, extending understanding of societal benefits and obligations, and preparing a diversity of students with the skills they need for a successful and rewarding life. These missions are important to the well-being of our people and the strength of our country. Recently, it has become apparent that higher education must give increased attention to skill development and educational attainment.

By 2031, 72% of the jobs in the U.S. will require post-secondary education or training, and 42% will require a bachelor's degree. The fastest-growing industries require workers with disproportionately higher education levels compared to industries with slower growth (Carnevale et al, 2023). Over time, if the country's workforce does not have the skills that employers need, firms may close, relocate to other countries, or operate with lower productivity. If these challenges remain unaddressed, our standard of living will decline, and the country will fall into a downward spiral of decreased tax revenue to pay for needed services.

Accompanying the skills gap is a serious employment equity issue. Research done by the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCI&I) revealed significant racial inequality in the workforce. Black and Latina/o/x workers are overwhelmingly employed in the lowest-paying jobs and significantly underrepresented in the highest-paying professions. The findings are consistent across all regions studied by NCI&I – across red states and blue states, geographic regions, and urban/suburban/rural areas (Johnstone, 2023).

Addressing the challenges of a growing skills gap and inequity in the workforce will require planning, vision, and foresight. Strategies to be considered include developing or expanding dual enrollment, apprenticeships, credit for prior learning, transfer, and community college baccalaureates.

DUAL ENROLLMENT

Establishing and expanding dual enrollment programs is a place to begin. Dual enrollment allows high school students to enroll in college courses and earn credits. High school students who experience college-level classes are more likely to continue with and complete college. However, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are not participating at equitable levels. Dual enrollment agreements should include strategies for increasing the inclusivity of dual enrollment programs.

The California community colleges focus on equitable access by calling for all ninth-graders to take at least a one-credit college course in which they explore potential careers and develop a preliminary college education plan that includes a minimum of 12 college credits during high school.

Apprenticeships toward a college credential

Registered apprenticeships have a track record of preparing students with employable skills, and they can lead to a college credential. The programs offer access to hundreds of occupations in high-growth and emerging industries. The U.S. Department of Labor recently initiated a program to make it more seamless for full-time high school and community college students to enroll in the apprenticeship system (Moody, K., 2023).

Credit toward a college credential for prior learning

Another strategy that colleges are using is to assess and grant credit for prior life experiences. Credit for prior learning (CPL) encourages adults to seek a college credential and improves completion rates. Adult students who earn CPL credits are 17% more likely to complete than those without CPL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, n.d.).



ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF A GROWING SKILLS GAP AND INEQUITY IN THE WORKFORCE REQUIRES THE IMMEDIATE ATTENTION OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION.”

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Baccalaureate attainment through transfer

One of the best ways to increase equitable baccalaureate attainment is by increasing the number of transfers from community colleges to public and independent universities. Policymakers and higher education leaders have been working to improve the transfer process and to remove barriers for students. Phi Theta Kappa, the International Honor Society for community college students, hosts a transfer honor role for universities that have established policies and procedures to assist community college students in the transfer process (Phi Theta Kappa, n.d.).


Baccalaureate attainment through community colleges

Twenty-four states have authorized community colleges to offer baccalaureates, mostly in applied subjects not offered by universities or in areas in which there is an unfilled need.

A 2022 evaluation of the California program by the UC Davis Wheelhouse reported several significant benefits. The two-year graduation rate across all 15 community college programs was 67% with three-year graduation rates reaching 78%. (Hoang, H., Vo, D., & Rios-Aguilar, C., 2022). The program also provided important access for old-

er adults. Nearly half of the students in the baccalaureate programs were between 25 and 34 years old. Across all graduating classes, 56% of the students reported that they would not have pursued a bachelor's degree if it had not been offered at their community college (Hoang, H., Vo, D., & Rios-Aguilar, C., 2022).

Conclusion

Addressing the challenges of a growing skills gap and inequity in the workforce requires the immediate attention of American higher education. Solutions can include increasing apprenticeship training, noncredit classes, certificate programs, transfer programs, and community college baccalaureates. Expansion of dual enrollment programs and credit for prior learning as well as enhanced student support services along with equity in funding support will make it possible to meet the challenges ahead. 

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