

Theory to Practice

Community College State Directors Perceptions of Changes to Adult Education: A National Portrait

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Abstract

Drawing on responses from state directors of community colleges, the article explores issues related to funding and offering adult education programs. Differences were found in states where central community college funding was in place as compared to locally funded colleges. Differences were found between the two groups on the inclusion of delivering adult education as a central part of the community colleges' statewide mission and these colleges holding statutory authority over delivering such instruction. Findings also identified that state leaders did not perceive online education or the new costly GED test as being helpful in reaching underserved adult education students.

Introduction

The community college movement in America incorporated multiple elements of mission, including the now often referenced articulation with four-year institutions, workforce education, and as an extension of the public secondary school, adult basic education. Adult Basic Education (ABE) was initially conceptualized in terms of an adult's ability to read and write, and is now described in terms of quantitative and qualitative literacy, and has even been expanded to digital literacy. Additionally, adult education has broadly become a competitive market for a variety of educational services, including workforce preparation, job training and

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retraining, leisure education, and most recently, mature adult leisure education programs. In each of these areas, private providers offer fee-based programming that have been determined to be profitable.

As the number of potential adult education providers expands, even into areas such as basic education, community colleges struggle to find the financial resources appropriate to fund a diverse offering of programs. The financial difficulty is accentuated by the reduced state revenues committed to adult literacy and workforce funding and the internal competition for resources that force college administrators to choose between serving traditionally aged students and returning adults. Additionally, the profitability of programs can become an issue in determining which programs are offered, with those with the promise of the highest financial return being given priority for implementation.

The setting of a community college can also have a tremendous impact on the scope, variety, and implementation of adult education programming. In highly urban areas, for example, there are multiple providers of different types of educational services, such as churches and non-profit agencies that offer language instruction, and museums and libraries that offer leisure learning opportunities. In highly rural settings, however, such opportunities for adult education may be greatly reduced, with state agencies relying on technology-driven distribution of programs, such as online adult literacy programs, video-based language instruction, and in some areas, continued use of educational television and radio.

The type of control a state also has over community colleges can impact how adult education programs are organized and offered. For example, state controlled funding mechanisms can provide programming in areas that lack local financial support to offer programs, while in other states, local programming is entirely driven by the financial ability of a college to offer revenue-neutral programming. The purpose of the current study was to explore how community colleges are engaged in offering adult education programs, primarily from the perspective of state-level policy makers. Specifically, the study sought to describe and compare changes in adult education provision of community college state directors by states that either have local or non-local funding.

Background of the Study

Community colleges have a history of providing adult and lifelong education opportunities to individuals in their communities. Cohen and

Brawer (2008) referred to these programs as “community education” (p. 317), and examples of their prevalence include the enrollment of nearly a quarter million adults in non-credit classes in the state of Mississippi. In other states, this education is primarily focused at workforce preparation, offering non-credit training to prepare adults to work in different industries. Cohen and Brawer were quick to note, however, that despite the broad use of adult education programs, they have struggled to keep pace with the institutional importance of degree and certificate programs.

Grover and Miller (2014) studied the offering of adult education programs in community colleges and found that they are primarily financially self-reliant, meaning that they must generate the revenue necessary to be offered. This revenue typically comes from user fees, but has also been subsidized through state and federal contracts and grants for programs such as literacy education or high-school level certification programs such as the GED. Further examples include educational policy initiatives in many states that provide for public funding of adult literacy testing, such as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or selected workforce certificate programs.

Programs offered to adults through community colleges have been categorized into at least three different and unique areas: adult education, continuing education, and lifelong learning. Wang (2004) found that community colleges, in particular, are strong at offering continuing professional education and re-training programs, often in areas where employers are willing to pay for certified instruction. These colleges do not do as well, however, in lifelong learning areas that are dependent upon personal payment for classes, and these classes and programs are driven by personal interest, and include programs such as book clubs, dance lessons, and other hobby-related education.

Adult education programs are those targeted at adults and typically refer to more basic educational programs, such as literacy, basic job training, and certificate programs. These educational opportunities often lead the participant to some type of exam or licensure, such as the GED test for high school equivalent knowledge or licensing as a practitioner in an occupational area. Changes to the GED test of high school equivalent education, including the computerization of the test and increased costs, have led many states to develop and offer their own version of the test and they rely on a combination of community colleges and local school districts to provide the training, although often funding for such activities are tied to state allocations. Similarly, job training programs are tied to state funding opportunities, although frequently the federal

funding opportunities that would allow for greatly increased funding carry significant paperwork and reporting burdens that community colleges are now well equipped to respond to (Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeo, & Jacobs, 2006).

Continuing education programs are those that typically are tied to workforce development, job re-training, and short-term contract training programs. The common element for all of these is that their offerings are tied directly to an external agency's ability to pay for the instruction. In some cases, these are coalitions of private businesses that need employees to have some specific skill, and in other instances, they are state-funded and prioritized efforts aimed at building employment capacity in a certain area.

Lifelong learning programs are those that incorporate leisure and community education, including those that are not tied specifically to any particular outcome other than fulfilling individual interests. As noted, these are often driven by enrollment demand, willingness, and ability to pay for the instruction. And although the revenue potential for these types of courses may be limited, they typically rely on a lower overhead cost, using local instructors and class facilitators who do not have to be concerned about holding a license to teach.

With the competition for resources between degree and certificate programs and other adult education programming, college leaders are typically caught in the middle of recognizing programs that have legitimacy in meeting community needs and those that have self-sustaining funding. This creates a challenge for these leaders who must balance the mission of the college, a key attribute and leadership quality that has been identified by multiple researchers (American Association of Community Colleges, 2005). The difficulty is intensified by the unique needs of adult learners (Largent & Horinck, 2008), and as a result, college leaders look to their state policy makers and coordinating agents for direction and support in making institutional decisions (Malamet, 1980).

Community colleges often rely on a combination of state and local funding to drive decision making, and more than half of all states (n=29) allow at least some local taxation to fund community college programs and initiatives (Kenton, Huba, Schuh, & Shelley, 2005). This distributed tax burden is unequal throughout many states and is variable based on the item being taxed to generate revenue, causing some states to shift to a more centralized model of state-distributed funding (Martinez & Nodine, 1997; King, 1998; Miller & Holt, 2005). Consistent with this consolidation of funding, only 12 states now allow for local taxation of

property to fund community college operation, and 13 states allow colleges to issue public bonds to finance college construction (King, 1998; Miller & Holt, 2005). The result is that state legislatures are now more active in funding community colleges than ever before, and as they create priorities and determine the criteria for issues money, they assume more power over the priorities of the college.

Legislative mandates have a long history in higher education appropriations, ranging from issuing rules and regulations about how research money is spent to forcing institutions into compliance with state mandates. Recent models for forcing institutions to comply with state priorities are commonly seen in performance funding models, where state legislative bodies can attempt to manipulate institutional performance indicators in exchange for funding. The same is true for establishing priorities related to adult learning, such as the case of paying local school districts for working with drop-out adults to earn alternative high school equivalent diplomas and providing funding ‘bonuses’ for working with the incarcerated on diploma completion.

The challenge to community college leaders is to balance the demand for traditional credit programs with non-credit activities, brokering state funding in a way that allows for a breadth of programs for adult community members while simultaneously offering programs that improve the quality of a community’s life. The critical question considered in this study is ultimately how that balance is realized; how community college state leaders see their role in charting the activities of local community colleges, and whether or not they have the ability to control their offerings even when they do not provide the funding. Results can pave the way for future college leaders and state policy makers to consider the implications of centralized versus decentralized programmatic decision making.

Research Methods

Data for the current study were collected from the 2014 University of Alabama’s Education Policy Center Annual Survey of the National Council of State Directors of Community Colleges (NCSDDCC). The survey is administered annually to these directors in all states and focuses on critical issues facing community college policy formation and implementation. In the 2014 version of the survey, a special 11-item section was included on issues facing community college offerings in adult education. These items were developed using a panel of geographically

representative adult educators and their practical experience in addition to references from the current literature base. These 11 items asked community college state directors to rate their agreement on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale.

The survey was distributed electronically to all 51 members of the NCSDDC in the Fall of 2014, and with two follow up communications, 48 state directors completed the survey. As a cautionary note, not all respondents completed a rating for each item.

Findings

Overall, the 11-adult education survey questions had a mean agreement rating of 3.17, suggesting neither strong agreement nor strong disagreement with any item. Two items had a mean agreement level above 4.0, including a guarantee that 2-year colleges should be represented on statewide workforce boards ($M = 4.13$; $SD = .8130$) and that the federal government should continue to fund Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) and similar programs in community colleges ($M = 4.19$; $SD = .9280$; see Table 1). As a combined group, state directors disagreed most with the two statements concerning funding for adult education programs, including that funding is adequate ($M = 2.08$; $SD = 1.324$) and that funding is increasing ($M = 2.39$; $SD = .9741$).

For centralized state control, state directors agreed most strongly with continuing TAA or similar programs ($M = 4.3$), followed by guaranteeing 2-year colleges a place on statewide workforce boards ($M = 4.13$) and expanding available high school equivalency exam offerings ($M = 3.58$). These directors disagreed most strongly with the idea that state funding for adult basic education is adequate ($M = 2.13$), the idea that funding will increase ($M = 2.38$), and that online programs are used to reach adult education students ($M = 2.71$). State directors that rely on local control agreed and disagreed most strongly with the same six items.

For items related to the GED exam, the disparity of individual state attitudes toward the new exam were reflected in neither strong agreement nor disagreement about the items included on the survey. Both items had mean ratings near 3.50 ($M = 3.59$ for expanding GED offerings to reach underserved students and $M = 3.52$ for the item on the negative impact of the more expensive GED on low income students) and standard deviations under 1.0. This may be a function of the range of state perceptions about accepting and celebrating the alignment of the GED

with Common Core standards and the higher costs for the administration and grading of the test.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Adult Education in Community Colleges

Adult Education Characteristic	Mean	Local	Non-Local	SD
ABLE is included in agency's state-wide mission statement	3.21	3.33	3.09	1.443
ABLE included in 2-year college mission statements	3.24	3.48	3.00*	1.319
2-yr colleges have statutory authority to deliver ABLE	3.19	3.46	2.91*	.775
Funding for ABLE is adequate for the needs in my state	2.09	2.04	2.13	1.324
State funding for ABLE is increasing	2.40	2.42	2.38	.974
2-year colleges increasing use of online delivery for ABLE	2.75	2.78	2.71	.723
Expanding high school equivalency/ GED exam offerings increases the ability of community colleges to reach underserved student populations	3.59	3.61	3.58	.762
The new, more costly GED exam negatively impacts low income student success	3.52	3.48	3.55	.825
Involvement in adult literacy/ABLE community education programming is a critical component in evaluating community college performance	2.94	3.00	2.88	1.178
Should the federal government continue to fund Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Program or a similar program.	4.20	4.10	4.32	.813
Federal law should guarantee 2-year Colleges a seat on statewide workforce Boards	4.13	4.13	4.13	.928

Using a one-way Analysis of Variance, $p = 0.03$ ($p < 0.05$) indicating a statistically significant difference between the local and non-local responses. A Scheffé multiple comparison was then conducted between the two sets of mean scores, with two significant differences identified. The Scheffé comparison identified that the state directors from states with local control agreed significantly more with the idea that adult education is included in the mission of the individual 2-year colleges and that 2-year colleges have authority to deliver adult education programs (see Table 1).

As shown in Table 2, among the 47 responding NCSDCC members, 23 were in agreement that Adult Basic Literacy Education is included in the state-wide community college system mission statements and 25 were in agreement that ABLE is included in their two-year college mission statements. Nearly the same number 23 indicated that their state's two-year colleges possess statutory authority to deliver ABLE instruction.

State community college leaders perceived that funding is a serious concern for ABLE instruction. Among the 47 respondents, not one agreed that funding for ABLE instruction was adequate to meet the needs in their states. Less than 20% of the respondents (8 of the 47; 17%) were in agreement that funding was increasing for ABLE activities, yet 40% (19 of 47) perceived involvement in adult literacy/ABLE/community education as a critical component in evaluating community college performance in their state.

Program Delivery Issues

Over half of the responding state directors (29 of 47; 60%) perceived the expansion of GED or high school equivalency testing as a tool to increase services for underserved students in their states. And the majority of respondents (28 of 47; 59%) reported a neutral perception of using online technologies to reach students served in ABLE programs. For those indicating, by a margin of 2:1, online education was not perceived to be an effective tool to reach ABLE students. When asked if the new, more expensive GED exam negatively impacts low income student success, again a majority of state directors reported neutral perceptions.

Related Key Federal Issues

The funding streams for nontraditional economic development programs traditionally have been from non-education sources, and as noted here

Table 2
Frequency of Responses to Survey Items

Adult Education Characteristic	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Dis. Disagree
Missions, funding, and evaluation issues			
Delivering ABLÉ is included in our agency's state-wide mission statement	23	31	21
Delivering ABLÉ is included in mission statements of my state's 2-yr colleges	25	4	19
My state's two-year colleges have statutory authority to deliver ABLÉ instruction	23	8	17
Funding for ABLÉ instruction is adequate to serve the needs in my state	0	16	31
State funding for Adult Basic Literacy Education/instruction programs is increasing	8	12	27
Involvement in adult literacy/ABLE community ed. programming is a critical component in evaluating community college performance in my state	17	11	20
Program delivery issues Expanding available H.S. equivalency/GED exam offerings increases the ability of community colleges to reach my state's underserved student populations	29	15	3
Increasingly, two-year colleges use online education to reach ABLÉ students	6	28	14
The new, more costly GED exam negatively impacts low income student success	20	24	3
Related key federal issues			
The federal government should continue to fund Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Program or a similar program	31	7	1
Federal law should guarantee 2-year colleges a seat on statewide workforce boards	37	8	3

not one responding state community college director indicated that funding was adequate to meet adult literacy needs in their states, and based on this, colleges have a need to lean on federal funding opportunities to augment state funding. When asked if the federal government should continue to fund the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Program (TAA) and similar programs, a majority of directors (39 of 47; 83%) agreed, as they did when asked about using federal law to guarantee w-year colleges representation on statewide workforce boards (37 of 47; 78%).

Discussion and Implications for Practice

There is inconsistency in how Adult Basic Literacy Education is assigned by the states and by the institutions, as well as by statutory authority across the fifty states. Respondents from 16 states indicated that ABLE is in their mission statements at both the state and institutional levels, and that statutory authority for their state's community colleges to deliver ABLE instruction exists. In another 20 states, the state or institution may have responsibility, and statutory authority may or may not exist. This would suggest that policy alignment in adult basic education is a problem in many states, a point underscored by the plurality of respondents indicating involvement in adult literacy/ABLE is not a critical component in evaluating community college performance.

What is beyond debate is the notion that funding is adequate to meet ABLE needs. Not one respondent among the state-level community college leaders indicated that funding is adequate to meet the needs in their state. Among the 16 states that included ABLE in their state and institutional mission statements, and in which statutory authority for ABLE is given to community colleges, just 3 indicated ABLE instruction funding is increasing. This does not bode well for the future, and state-level community college leaders clearly do not see increasing use of online instruction to reach ABLE students, even as most believe ABLE programs should be expanded (29 in agreement, compared to 3 in disagreement). Funding shortfalls may in part explain the strong support for continued federal involvement in TAA programs, and for federal law to guarantee two-year colleges a seat on statewide workforce boards.

Finally, there is underlying concern over the changes in the GED examination. In 2014, after 70 years, the American Council on Education ended its management of this test turning the rights to the examination

over to a private, proprietary company. Among the 23 responses, 20 were in agreement that the new, more costly GED examination impacts low-income student success. Among the respondents from the 16 states that report ABLE is in their mission statements at both the state-wide and institutional levels, and that statutory authority for their state's community colleges to deliver ABLE instruction exists, 8 were in agreement that the new, more expensive GED negatively impacts low income student success.

Conclusions

Community colleges have a role in providing a wide variety of adult education programming, but they must refine how they define their mission in working with different types of programs. They often have a proximity to underserved populations, and with the right levels of financial support, they can provide key learning opportunities not only for job training, but also for basic literacy and for high school equivalent education. With strong state-level leadership, community colleges can indeed continue to play a central role, collaborating with public schools, in enhancing the welfare of all citizens through further education.

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