



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A RECORD YEAR FOR AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

In the past year, the spotlight has been on community colleges in the United States. In July 2009, President Obama gave unprecedented support for the community college mission in his announcement of the American Graduation Initiative (AGI), stating: "...jobs requiring at least an associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as jobs requiring no college experience. We will not fill those jobs, or even keep those jobs here in America, without the training offered by community colleges."

While the AGI, with its \$12 billion funding for innovative education programs, unfortunately did not become law, the Health Care and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act (HCEARA), signed in March 2010, is still a victory for educators. Providing \$2 billion for the Community College and Career Training Grant program, the HCEARA legislation will fund training and education programs at institutions that serve the needs of current and potentially dislocated workers. The new law also addresses funding issues in the Pell Grant program, consolidates all federal student loans into the Direct Loan program, and funds \$2.55 billion to minority-serving institutions over the next 10 years.

President Obama, in the same AGI speech, further amplified the importance of community colleges by asking Dr. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, to "...promote community colleges and help us make community colleges stronger." Dr. Biden has been an English instructor for more than 28 years, with over 16 of those years spent in a community college system. In a September 23, 2009, guest blog for *The Washington Post*, Dr. Biden writes that she chooses to teach at a community college because of her students. She says, "Every day in my classroom I am inspired by their commitment, their struggles, and their belief

in education as the best hope for a brighter future for themselves and their families."

The current national spotlight on community colleges also highlights some of our students whose lives were transformed by their education. Toni Jacobson was one of our valedictorians this year at Mt. Hood Community College (OR). In addition to graduating at the age of 47 with a 4.0 grade point average, she is also a recovered methamphetamine addict who dropped out of high school and survived a 15-year drug addiction. She says, "At one time, I was an emotional, physical, dysfunctional, and incredibly wounded wreck."

Jacobson credits years of therapy, hard work, and the caring individuals in helping her overcome addiction and pursue college studies. She starts working this fall on her bachelor's degree in social work at Concordia University, and she now shares her

inspirational story with the young inner-city girls she mentors. "I tell them it is OK to make mistakes in life, to learn some of life's hardest lessons from those mistakes, and to always dream."

While Jacobson's dreams now seem attainable, the national spotlight on community colleges this past year also highlighted an area where some dreams are failing. President Obama noted, in his AGI speech, that "more than half of all students who enter community college to earn an associate degree, or transfer to a four-year school to earn a bachelor's degree, unfortunately fail to reach their goal. That's not just a waste of a valuable resource; that's a tragedy for these students."

The issue of college completion rates is complex, especially in the community college setting. A student might desire to gain new work skills, obtain a program certificate, or earn an associate degree—three equally legitimate, yet very different objectives. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is embracing this issue through the development of the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA). The VFA is a measurement system that will allow colleges

Editor's Note

This article is the first in a series from the American Association of Community Colleges. Each year, the current Chair of the AACC Board will be asked to submit a paper of national interest for publication in *Innovation Abstracts*.



to benchmark their students' progress and completion data while providing crucial information to the public. The VFA initiative currently includes representatives from more than 50 community colleges and educational organizations who are mining a wealth of historical data and innovative proposals to formulate the initiative's final metrics.

Going forward, the AACC hopes to showcase increasing completion rates from our students and success stories from their colleges. Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC) in Jamestown, N.C., is an outstanding example. GTCC was named the 2010 Leah Meyer Austin Award winner, in part for its unique "front door experience" which combines intensive first-year student orientation and support services with a physical restructuring of support offices into a central, accessible location. The school credits student, staff, and faculty input and data analyses for its successful program and says the results have reduced system inefficiencies and increased student retention.

So how do we, as educators, maintain this national spotlight on education going forward? We can learn from the innovative programs of colleges like GTCC and others. We can increase completion rates through greater involvement in the VFA process and by sharing best-practice data and ideas across campuses. We can engage faculty, staff, and students in ongoing collaborative initiatives aimed at increasing student success. These efforts then can culminate in a thriving future for both our nation's community colleges and the students we educate.

John J. "Ski" Sygielski is chairman of the American Association of Community Colleges Board and president of Mt. Hood Community College (OR).

FURTHER READING

American Graduation Initiative

- http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-the-American-Graduation-Initiative-in-Warren-MI/
- http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0323_agi_berube.aspx
- <http://thehill.com/homenews/senate/86559-ax-would-fall-on-college-graduation-initiative-in-health-bill>

Healthcare and Education Affordability Reconciliation Act

- <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/newsevents/News/articles/Pages/031820101.aspx>

Dr. Jill Biden

- <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/community-colleges/dr-jill-biden-guest-blogs-on-c.html>
- http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-the-American-Graduation-Initiative-in-Warren-MI/

Voluntary Framework of Accountability

- <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/vfa/Pages/default.aspx>

Guilford Technical Community College:

- http://www.aacc.nche.edu/newsevents/News/articles/Documents/leahaustinaward_pr_2010.pdf
- <http://www.gtcc.edu/publications/pressReleases/docs/25kNationalAustinLeadershipAward.pdf>