

teaching

TEACHER SUPPLY & QUALITY

the changing role of **Community Colleges**

New federal policies on teacher quality, coupled with longstanding teacher supply and quality issues, are prompting a rethinking of how teachers are recruited and prepared. This shift is leading many to reconsider the role of community colleges in meeting local needs for teachers. Accessible and affordable, with established relationships with school districts and universities, community colleges are uniquely positioned, many say, to become focal points for attracting, preparing, and supporting a diverse range of teacher candidates.

This brief examines the facts underlying that assertion. In doing so, it also addresses the need to ensure that community colleges, along with other teacher preparation programs, are held accountable for high standards of quality and rigor. Finally, it offers policy considerations for those looking to harness the community college potential.

Why Community Colleges Are Pivotal

Nearly every state has a community college within easy commuting distance of most residents,¹ and in rural areas, community colleges often provide the only access to higher education in students' home communities. In recent years, these two-year institutions — 1,100 across the U.S. — have begun attracting more attention for their perceived potential to help address the growing teacher shortage. For example, many community colleges are well positioned to:

Attract teachers from diverse backgrounds. The need for a more diverse teacher force is clear: some 36 percent of the K–12 students in U.S. public schools are ethnic minorities, compared with only 14 percent of their teachers.² Community colleges enroll nearly half of all U.S. undergraduates, many of whom are first generation, minority and/or working students who cannot afford or cannot relocate to a four-year university.³ Moreover, community colleges often draw students willing to teach in the kinds of settings where they grew up,⁴ a factor that may help address the increasingly recognized distribution problem, i.e., the chronic difficulty many inner city and rural school districts face in attracting and keeping qualified teachers.⁵ Because they are set up to serve part-time students, community colleges also attract mid-career candidates who must continue to work while in school. This group includes classroom paraprofessionals who would like to become teachers but may not be able to quit their jobs or relocate to be closer to a four-year

institution. Finally, community colleges' minimal prerequisites spell opportunity for many highly capable people, native born or immigrant, who, for differing reasons (e.g., poor academic record, non-traditional education experience) do not yet meet admissions requirements at many four-year schools.

Provide particular kinds of subject matter and professional development. According to a 1999 survey, four out of 10 of the nation's teachers completed at least a portion of their undergraduate science and mathematics coursework at community colleges before transferring to four-year universities.⁶ Some state universities condone and encourage completing these course requirements at community colleges, where smaller class sizes and accessible faculty can have a positive impact on student performance. Veteran teachers often turn to community colleges for professional development — sharpening their knowledge of mathematics and science, for example, or learning new technology skills without ever having to leave their communities.

Have close ties to K–12 districts. Many community colleges have established mutually beneficial relationships with elementary, middle, and high schools. A community college can provide professional development courses and, in some cases, new teachers to partner schools, while the partner schools may offer teacher internships and mentors to community college students — opportunities some universities lack.

Tapping the Community College Potential

In the face of teacher and paraprofessional shortages, many states are formalizing the feeder role of community colleges by, for example, encouraging formal agreements

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND REQUIREMENTS FOR HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS⁷

By the 2002-2003 school year, new teachers must be fully licensed or certified by the state. New elementary grade teachers must have a bachelor's degree and pass a state test on knowledge and teaching skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. New middle and high school teachers must have a bachelor's degree and, also, a major, graduate degree, or advanced certification in subjects taught (or otherwise demonstrate competency). Teachers of English learners must be certified in language instruction and fluent (written and oral) in English.

By the 2005-2006 school year, existing teachers must have a bachelor's degree and meet above requirements or demonstrate competency (via state evaluation) in subjects taught. Requirements for teachers of English learners are the same as above.

between K–12 schools, community colleges, and universities. Some are enabling community colleges to grant teacher certification to holders of bachelor's degrees and/or bolster programs of professional development to help certificated teachers meet *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) requirements.

Others are going further, allowing community colleges in locales with high need to award bachelor's degrees to prospective students via new, four-year programs, a move that breaks with tradition and has stirred controversy around issues of rigor and quality. Community college teacher preparation programs are now in place in 22 states. These include those feeding into four-year university programs for teacher candidates, those providing teacher certification for holders of bachelor's degrees, and those conferring associate's and bachelor's degrees in teacher education.⁸

Such trends are changing the role of community colleges. Examples include:

- **Cross-level partnerships.** Both formal and informal partnerships between community colleges and four-year education institutions and/or K–12 districts are being used to increase partners' capacity to attract, develop, and support teacher candidates to meet local needs. For example:

In Virginia, a collaboration between two- and four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) helps fill the state's need for mathematics and science teachers by providing structured induction experiences (e.g., new teacher mentoring

and support). Led by both two- and four-year college faculty and experienced teachers from participating regions, the experiences are designed to make sure no novice teacher gets lost along the way.⁹ Acknowledging the collaborative's success, the legislature has passed a resolution encouraging the state accreditation agency to pave the way for other IHEs across the state to follow suit.

Northern Arizona University (NAU) combines its longstanding community college partnerships with formal articulation agreements to provide students an option known as 2 + 2: Students enroll simultaneously at both institutions, but spend the first two years at the community college and the last two years at the four-year institution. For students who need to complete their degrees without relocating, NAU makes this program even more accessible by sending its faculty to community college campuses to teach NAU's upper-level teacher preparation courses.

In California, a partnership between two-year Orange Coast College and area school districts allows students in the college's *Pathways* program to be employed as aides and paraprofessionals at local schools, earning them valuable classroom experience and preparation on the road to becoming certified teachers.

- **Alternative certification and professional development initiatives.** A number of states have approved community college programs that award teacher certification to individuals who already have a bachelor's degree.¹⁰ In Arizona, Rio Salado College prepares degree holders to become teachers through online courses along with an on-site practicum, sessions with master teachers, and a nine-week student teaching component. The flexibility of online courses enables students to choose from 26 start dates, then work at their own pace. Program completion results in elementary, secondary, or special education teacher certification. Through reciprocal agreements, students outside Arizona may take these courses and become certified in their respective states.

Ohio law allows teachers to receive credit for professional development courses completed at community colleges. This helps districts whose teachers are credentialed but need more coursework to meet new certification requirements.¹¹

- **Expanded degree options.** Less common and more controversial is the trend toward allowing community colleges to grant bachelor's degrees. This is occurring thus far in places remote from universities and/or where the need for new teachers is especially acute. Critics wonder whether the typical open admission (i.e., minimal prerequisites) policies of community colleges are compatible with the goal of producing high-quality teachers. Moreover, they note, few two-year colleges are authorized and equipped to offer the kind of advanced upper division coursework requisite to the broad, deep content knowledge teachers need. Yet many agree that

if community colleges can indeed prepare highly qualified teachers, as defined by clear and rigorous academic standards, they should be encouraged to do so. Some argue that because such programs are being developed in accordance with new requirements (e.g., those of NCLB), their graduates could potentially be better prepared than those from existing programs still trying to revamp.

Florida's St. Petersburg College (SPC) is one example of how this debate is playing out. At the request of local school districts facing severe teacher shortages, the two-year college has developed, and is working toward accreditation for, a four-year teacher education program resulting in a bachelor's degree. As with such efforts in general, skeptics continue to express concern about the program's rigor, but SPC is spawning imitators: Miami-Dade Community College has won state board approval to offer bachelor's degrees in subject areas where shortages exist (e.g., mathematics and secondary education).¹²

Nevada's Great Basin College — serving an area 280 miles from the nearest four-year institution — offers an accredited, four-year bachelor's program in elementary education as part of a collaboration with five school districts.¹³ The college's leaders note the small program size and K–12 partnerships as essential to their success. Arizona, Arkansas, and Utah are considering similar degree-granting authorization.¹⁴

To increase the number of paraprofessionals, Maryland has, since 2001, authorized community colleges to award associate's degrees in teaching so that these teacher candidates can more easily progress toward becoming full-fledged teachers. Associates who complete internships in local schools and meet grade point and testing requirements are able to count all credits toward a baccalaureate degree.¹⁵

Policy Considerations

States working to develop comprehensive systems for addressing teacher workforce demands should focus on meeting needs, rather than on preserving traditional institutional roles. NCLB requirements are likely to spur more localities to harness existing teacher recruitment and preparation resources in innovative ways across two- and four-year institutions. State policymakers can encourage others to follow suit by:

- **Developing common standards.** Because teacher preparation has traditionally been the purview of four-year colleges and universities, state and federal standards for teacher preparation programs have not applied to community colleges. In terms of teacher preparation (excluding degree-granting programs), community colleges are more frequently classified as alternative providers. That designation casts doubts, which may be unwarranted, about their relative rigor.¹⁶ Common standards, content, outcomes, and quality are critical if

curricula across IHEs are to be aligned and credits recognized and seamlessly transferred.

- **Treating all IHEs as parts of the same funding whole.** States implicitly discourage IHE partnerships when universities and community colleges fall under separate legislative committees, funding streams, or state agencies, especially if the IHEs are competing for the same pot of money. Meeting the teacher workforce challenge calls for treating all IHEs, legislatively, as parts of the same whole.
- **Streamlining the transfer process.** Whether done voluntarily or legislatively, smoothing the transition from community college to university benefits students. Leaders in at least 47 states have worked to develop cooperative articulation agreements at the local level, to establish state databases that track student transfers to monitor the progress of articulation, or to create a common core curricula or even course numbering systems. Most of these agreements have emerged from voluntary commissions or committees. However, 30 states, including Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Nevada, and Utah, have legislated articulation and transfer policies that ensure community college credit can be applied at four-year universities and that, in some cases, define a common curriculum.¹⁷
- **Developing comprehensive accountability for teacher preparation programs.** All teacher preparation programs should be held to the same high standards of academic rigor. As states move toward innovations such as allowing community colleges to grant bachelor's degrees, they can take the opportunity to ensure that these and all other teacher education programs are held accountable for the performance of their graduates — something few programs now guarantee.

Clear IHE accountability guidelines would allow community colleges a means of validating program quality. Guidelines would address such issues as accreditation. Will state requirements be the same for community college programs as for four-year IHEs? Besides state accreditation, what regional and/or national accreditation should community colleges seek as they strive to ensure (and gain recognition for) the rigor of their programs? How does the state oversee this process for all IHEs? (Florida and Nevada have developed processes by which the state department of education reviews all programs seeking national accreditation in order to track and monitor these efforts.¹⁸)

- **Making better use of data to pinpoint needs and rethink institutional roles in meeting them.** Analysis of data on teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention can reveal better ways of investing resources. For example, a 2003 report on Arizona's teacher supply and demand indicates that the University of Phoenix certifies over 12 percent of the state's teachers using online courses.¹⁹ This might suggest expanding distance learning, an initiative well-handled by community colleges.

Endnotes

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