

**Bringing Students and Employers Together:
How community colleges are uniquely positioned to support the needs of business
and industry and promote workforce development.**

Jeffrey D. Craig

University of Massachusetts Boston

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Abstract

This paper examines the unique partnerships that exist between community colleges, business and industry, government and civic organizations, and other institutions of higher education. It begins with an overview of roles that community colleges play in their respective communities, their strengths, and how the concept of vocational education has evolved over the last few decades. The heart of the paper reviews important strategies for building and sustaining successful workforce collaborations followed by presentations of five unique and distinct projects that demonstrate various configurations of these strategies. Finally, I take stock of where this research might lead me and how I would like to apply its findings in my professional work.

I am employed as a job placement counselor at Bristol Community College in Fall River, Massachusetts. My responsibilities include bringing students and employers together to help them begin their careers or find jobs while in school. I also help students prepare for the job search process by providing orientations to various job search tools and offering résumé development and interview coaching sessions. In addition, I coordinate three job fairs per year, including one that focuses on the health sciences sector. (The College also offers a job fair geared towards the human services, which is jointly coordinated by the Human Services Department and the BCC Career Center.)

I was drawn to this topic because I have an interest in attracting more jobs for BCC students. Since I began my job fourteen months ago, I have observed that employers seemingly consider listing jobs with us as an afterthought, perhaps because the Career Center lacks a comprehensive strategy for marketing our services to them. It is my intention to change this and encourage employers to think of BCC as their first choice for workforce development. My interest has intensified in recent months because I have begun to notice the effects of the economic decline. While more students are seeking employment, I am receiving fewer job listings. It has also become more challenging to recruit employers to participate in job fairs. (Even after they commit to attending a job fair, some recruiters have cancelled just days before because they are no longer hiring; some have been forced to layoff staff.) In the coming months, I intend to expand on this research to learn as much as possible about the strengths and roles that community colleges play in the community so I can develop marketing strategies to sell our student's skills to employers and encourage them to think of BCC as their first choice when seeking to expand or upgrade their workforce.

The Role of Community Colleges

According to January 2008 figures from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), there are 987 public, 177 private, and 31 tribal community colleges in the United States. They enroll 11.5 million individuals in credit and non-credit courses, and award 555,000 Associates degrees and 295,000 Certificates annually. According to Bragg (2001, a), community colleges prepare the nation's current and future (emerging) workforce by offering a variety of educational pathways, including:

- Associates degrees in arts, sciences, and applied sciences for students seeking to transfer to four-year institutions;
- Vocational preparation associates and certificate programs that focus on the cognitive and technical skills needed to enter and advance in professional, technological, and service careers;
- Customized training, retraining and skills improvement for emergent and incumbent learners;
- Adult Basic Education, ESL and GED preparation;
- Courses for high school students to help them improve their ability to excel at the post-secondary level while simultaneously earning college credits (e.g., Dual Enrollment); and
- Cultural activities and opportunities for lifelong learning.

These programs have far-reaching benefits for communities. For example, individuals who earn an education gain an economic boost and self-sufficiency; businesses gain a more skilled workforce so they can be more successful and competitive; the state economy grows as a more capable workforce attracts new businesses and stabilizes others; and taxpayers benefit from less unemployment, less dependence on welfare, lower taxes, and lower crime rates

(Bragg, a). But in order to realize these benefits, communities need to invest in higher education and make it accessible to its citizens.

Kevin Dougherty, a leading scholar of community college education, claimed that “the community college is the single largest and most important portal into higher education.” If this is so, great credit is due to open enrollment policies, unique to community colleges, which allow admission to virtually anyone who has earned a high school diploma or GED, regardless of academic standing in high school or college entrance exam scores. This policy has increased access to a community college education for millions of Americans who may not have otherwise considered college (Bragg, a, p. 95).

In addition to promoting access, open enrollment fosters diversity. Indeed, when compared to four-year institutions, community college students are far more diverse. For example, community college students are older, more likely to be female and members of racial or ethnic minority groups. They are also more likely to be the first person in their family to attend college, come from a non-English-speaking family, be recent immigrants, or a combination of these. Moreover, studies show that open enrollment has made community colleges a primary gateway for racial or ethnic minority groups to enter higher education, either immediately after high school or later in life (Bragg, a).

Changing Terminology

Many terms have described the kinds of vocational education available at community colleges over the last several decades. In the 1940s, it was referred to as *terminal* and *semiprofessional*, and in the 1970s terms like *career* and *occupational education* emerged. More recently, *sub-baccalaureate*, *technical*, and *technological* have been used. The 1990s introduced terms like *workforce preparation*, *workforce development*, *human resource development*, and

economic development. These latter terms describe broader concepts, however. Workforce preparation, for example, describes education geared towards the emerging workforce; workforce development and human resource development are both associated with trainings for organizations seeking to equip their incumbent workers with additional or more advanced skills; and economic development focuses on the collection of programs that community colleges offer to stabilize or increase employment in a community (Bragg, 2001, b).

Community Colleges and Their Role in Workforce Development

In recent years there has been an increase in demand for jobs that require education and training at the sub-baccalaureate level. This change in labor market demand has become known as *the new economy*. At the same time, the so-called *new vocationalism* has emerged where the focus and scope of vocational education has evolved: "Work in this new environment requires a heightened ability to manage information and technology, analyze and solve problems, and continuously engage in learning to use new and updated information. This picture of the workplace stands in stark contrast to the past, when vocational education was characterized as mostly preparation for narrowly defined, entry-level employment." (Bragg, b, p. 7)

Community colleges are equipped to meet these current and future demands; in fact, preparation for careers in business, healthcare, and many technological fields occurs largely in sub-baccalaureate vocational programs. The AACC reports that 59% of new nurses and other healthcare workers, and 80% of firefighters and law enforcement officers are educated and credentialed at community colleges. There are estimates that three-fourths the nation's mid-skilled workforce is educated in community colleges (Bragg, b).

Community colleges are also known as providers of superior training and development programs for business and industry because they have the flexibility, accessibility and the resources that other training programs and institutions of higher education cannot match (Motta, 1999). "Community colleges are recognized by leading corporations as major providers of training for high technology occupations and the only training resources positioned to provide the sequential training opportunities that move unemployed workers into the workplace and current workers into more demanding and rewarding positions." (p.251) The President of the Des Moines Area Community College stated that "[c]ommunity colleges are able to react quickly to meet business leaders' demands, shuttering programs that provide job training for which businesses no longer have demands and adding new programs as the need arises." (Dalbey, 2005, p. 3) In addition, the faculty is well-versed in teaching non-traditional, diverse populations, and many have strong technical skills and ties to local industry, which helps keep curricula current. (AACC Research and Statistics: Community data, n.d.). In addition, trainings can be offered at convenient times, on- or off-site, or using distance learning options (Buono, 2000). These qualities demonstrate great flexibility, adaptability, and convenience for employers seeking to increase the skills of their current workforce or create conditions where they will have continuous access to new highly skilled workers.

Collaboration Principles and Strategies

Community colleges routinely collaborate with business and industry, government and civic organizations, and other institutions of higher education for the purposes of creating a knowledgeable and highly skilled workforce. This section takes a closer look at how and why collaborations are formed between sectors, the kinds of projects that result, and various ways in which they can benefit a community.

Collaboration has been defined as a “strategic joint relationship between two or more organizational entities” (Orr, 2001, p. 41) and “a process of joint decision making of a problem domain about the future of that domain.” (Hood, Logsdon & Thomson, 1993, p. 2)

Organizations form collaborative relationships for a variety of reasons; however, the most common motivations appear to revolve around identifying and capitalizing on complimentary resources, managing risks, and sharing costs (Orr).

Kisker (2003) describes the four most important strategies to building and sustaining successful community college-private sector collaborations. These strategies, she contends, “provide insight into the organizational qualities and leadership practices that are critical to the formulation of productive relationships.”(p.2)

1. **Recognize community needs.** Local business leaders, civic leaders and community college administrators should engage in frequent and candid dialogue about the community’s economic growth, labor demands, and social welfare. They should flesh out community needs and identify those that call for collective action. Civic organizations and community boards provide an opportunity for networking and identifying common community concerns and needs.
2. **Establish a shared mission and goals.** Through the intentional process of sharing concerns, ideas and expertise, a shared mission and a set of specific, realistic and measurable goals should emerge. Organizations should also identify areas where their missions overlap. “It is within these overlapping interests that the most promising seeds of successful partnerships are found, for it appears that when a partnership emanates from an overlapping but noncompetitive mission, its potential and potential durability are

the greatest.” (p.3)

3. **Create value and benefit for all partners.** Although it may seem obvious, tangible economic and political rewards should benefit all parties. For businesses, profit is essential to operate and remain viable; therefore, “the benefit becomes an even more important component in partnerships with them.” (p. 56) For community colleges, budget shortfalls in troubled economic times can strain services; establishing partnerships with the private sector can provide an important source of revenue. Also, community colleges face enormous pressure from the community to develop and maintain cutting-edge programs; the private sector can provide invaluable insight and resources in this area. Overall, maintaining successful partnerships can best be achieved by continually assessing the value being delivered and by being flexible and responsive to each other’s needs.

4. **Establish a system of shared governance and accountability.** This involves “decisions pertaining to hiring practices, staffing matters, compensation, and the day-to-day operations of project facilities as significant sources of tension between partners.” This can be facilitated by “the creation of a governance structure that ensures all constituents representation in matters of both daily and long-term consequence.” (p. 4)

Model Collaborative Projects

In my research, I discovered many unique and powerful examples of collaborations between community colleges, business and industry, government and civic organizations, and other

institutions of higher education. In the following section, I provide brief accounts of five projects that I felt exemplify the breadth and depth of possibilities in terms of partners, motivations, strategies, and outcomes.

Collaboration 1: NYNEX Corporation and the State University of New York (SUNY) community college system.

NYNEX Corporation recognized the need for better critical thinkers among its technicians in 1996. Faced with constant challenges in keeping pace with emerging technologies, NYNEX realized that technicians could no longer anticipate every problem or rely upon simple flow charts for direction. They needed to create a new generation of thinkers who could anticipate, analyze and solve problems using critical thinking skills. To address the problem, NYNEX teamed up with the State University of New York (SUNY) community college system to create NYNEX University – an on-site training program for NYNEX employees. The Next Step Program (NSP) – a subset of NYNEX University - offered technicians a chance to earn an Associates degree in Applied Science. Tuition, fees and books were provided, free of charge. Participants worked their regular job four days a week and attended school one day a week, while retaining their full salary. NYNEX expressed its dedication to its employees in the NSP mission statement: "... to provide an innovative, educational, skills-based program that will enable employees to stay apace with advancing technology, to understand changing marketplace realities, and to develop customer-service skills through the acquisition of an associate degree in applied science with a focus on telecommunications technology. The result will be an autonomous, customer-accountable work force that is committed to the value of life-long learning." (Smith, 1996, p.6)

NYNEX worked closely with the SUNY community college system to design “umbrella competencies” – those skills that must be taught throughout all the courses in the NSP curriculum. They included: “customer-contact skills; quality; team-building and teamwork; project leadership (planning, organizing; conflict resolution); problem-solving; and technology and service.” (p.6) Instructors were required to employ learner-centered instruction, which de-emphasizes the lecture approach and highlights “collaborative learning activities, team-building activities, building students’ responsibility for their own learning, peer teaching, and a project- and problem-centered approach to learning.” (p.6)

Collaboration 2: General Nutrition Corporation (GNC) and the University of Florida Division of Continuing Education.

General Nutrition Corporation, more commonly known as GNC, initiated another creative academic-industry educational partnership. A worldwide producer and marketer of nutritional supplements and dietary products, GNC found that their managers lacked the knowledge to effectively discuss nutrition concepts with customers. In 2002, the company contacted the University of Florida’s Division of Continuing Education to develop a program whereby managers were required to complete a cluster of online courses in introductory nutrition over a two-year period. Since its workforce was so widely dispersed, online courses were offered. Employees were able to work at their own pace as long as they completed the program in two years. GNC consulted with the university to design a custom curriculum that would address “nutrition functions and food sources, effects of nutrient deficiency and excess, nutrient requirements, the role of nutrition in physiologic systems, and the changes in nutrient requirements and nutrition concerns at various life cycle stages.” (Irani et al, 2007,p. 130) Although the GNC program didn’t involve a community college system per se, it demonstrated another creative academic-

industry collaborative effort where business leaders worked closely with an academic institution to design a custom curriculum that suited its mission and goals – in this case to equip its managers with the knowledge to have informative conversations with customers about GNC’s products and consequently improving customer service and satisfaction (Irani et al).

Collaboration 3: CONNECT, a partnership of five public higher education institutions in Southeastern Massachusetts.

The CONNECT partnership provides an exemplary illustration of how institutions of higher education can form productive alliances with each other to address common concerns. In 2003, five institutions of higher education in Southeastern Massachusetts—Bristol Community College, University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, Bridgewater State College, Massasoit Community College, and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy—joined forces to address concerns about significant back-to-back double-digit state budget cuts that had potential to threaten the programs and services they offer. First, they developed a shared mission and a set of basic goals: “to improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of higher education; and to advance the economic, educational and cultural life of Southeastern Massachusetts.” (CONNECT, n.d.) To address the budget crisis, they developed concrete strategies to pool and leverage their resources that realized hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings. For instance, they orchestrated joint bidding on banking and auditing services and technology training sessions, and leveraged partnership capabilities to provide professional development opportunities to its campus communities. Of course, the CONNECT partners also share a common goal to develop a well-educated and skilled workforce that will result in strong economic growth and prosperity. To do so effectively, they meet regularly with business leaders to evaluate local and regional

workforce needs and seek ways to collaborate with the private sector while maintaining a balance of value for each party (J. Souza, personal communication, November 10, 2008).

Businesses have taken notice of CONNECT's influence. In 2006, for example, MEDITECH, which produces medical information software for hospitals and physician practices, contacted CONNECT when it was planning to open a facility in Fall River. They shared their intent to employ nearly 900 workers and invited CONNECT representatives to tour their main facility, introduce them to their product, acquaint them to the types of skills they desired, and describe the hiring process. The outreach effort paid great dividends: MEDITECH has formed a strong working relationship with the partnership, particularly with Bristol Community College (BCC) and the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, which have provided MEDITECH with a steady stream of skilled workers over the past few years.

BCC and MEDITECH have bonded further through the College's Employer in Residence Program (ERP), a unique arrangement between the Career Center and MEDITECH's recruiting department. Through the ERP, MEDITECH has offered BCC students an array of exciting opportunities over the past two years to help them navigate the world of professional employment. For instance, recruiters visit BCC to provide individual résumé critique and mock interview sessions and conduct workshops on how to impress human service professionals. Students also have an opportunity to partake in job shadow days that offer a chance to learn about various career paths at MEDITECH and to observe the daily routines and responsibilities of professionals in the student's field of interest. The job shadow day includes an opportunity for students to enjoy lunch with BCC alumni who currently work at MEDITECH and members of the MEDITECH recruitment staff. This year, faculty members attended a breakfast event to discuss the kinds of high tech skills that employers are seeking in new graduates as well as to learn about career paths in the industry.

Collaboration 4: Carl Sandburg Community College and the Center for Manufacturing Excellence (CME).

Illinois-based Carl Sandburg Community College (CSCC) learned about the value of pooling resources when it teamed up with the local school district, Knox College (a private liberal arts college), and the Galesburg Area Chamber of Commerce to build a 30,000 square-foot, state-of-the-art manufacturing training facility for college industrial programs and for customized training for area manufacturers. The idea was born from mutual concerns about a lack of technical training resources in the community. The partners met and discussed the idea of building a facility that could accommodate distance learning, satellite conferencing, and public computer labs that could serve all three institutions and the general public. The project was completed in 1996 and provided a model for how academic, private sector, and civic organizations can define a vision and implement a plan for the betterment of the community. The partnership was so successful that it received accolades from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Congress. CSCC gained a great deal of respect and trust in the community as well, which allowed them to move forward in building more partnerships (Sundberg, 2002).

Faced with a severe workforce shortage in 1996, several manufacturers approached CSCC—including Maytag, the largest manufacturer in the area with over 2,400 employees—to express concerns that the workforce lacked the necessary math and computer technology skills to be productive employees. To make matters worse, one-third of the current manufacturing workforce was expected to retire in the five to ten years (Sundberg).

In response, several manufacturing business owners and representatives, leaders from the Chamber of Commerce economic development council, and college leaders traveled the country to research how these issues had been resolved in similar communities. They discovered many successful endeavors, but all were owned and operated by a college or the

private sector; there were no entirely joint ventures. Since there were no existing models to emulate, they had to figure a way to build a project that capitalized on all side's expertise and insights while maintaining structure and balance (Sundberg).

After eighteen months of research and planning, the Center for Manufacturing Excellence was conceived, a two million dollar facility that would house state-of-the-art manufacturing equipment and provide customized training for manufacturers as well as the college's degree and certificate programs (Sundberg).

There were significant challenges. For example, businesses became frustrated by the bureaucracy of community colleges. Statutory regulations around the use of architects and approvals by the Illinois Community College Board slowed the process considerably. The business owners, on the other hand, were profit driven and used to making quick decisions. It was a mutual learning curve that was eased by constant communication. "Whereas a for-profit business's prime audience is its stakeholders, the community college has multiple constituencies, both internal and external. The main way that this concern was dealt with was by both sides staying in constant dialogue." (Sundberg, p. 17)

CSCC representatives found that the principle elements of forming partnerships with private industry to be simple in theory, but difficult to execute; however, they did learn some invaluable insights for ways in which community colleges can foster closer connections with business and civic leaders as well as the general public. For example, they suggested that administrators and faculty participate on community boards of directors, service clubs, and other civic organizations. Additionally, the President should be engaged with the Chamber of Commerce and Workforce Investment Boards. S/he and other college representatives should host town meetings throughout the college district to meet with business leaders from a broad

array of sectors as well as residents to learn about concerns and brainstorm ideas to address them (Sundberg).

The facility is a tangible example of how various sectors can come together with a common purpose to solve mutual problems. Although it is built on college grounds, it is independent of the college and maintains its own Board of Directors made up of the CSCC President, two college trustees, three manufacturers, the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce, the Director of the Galesburg Regional Economic Development Association, and the Superintendent of the local public school system (Sundberg).

Collaboration 5: Wisconsin Technical College System and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

RISE (Regional Industry Skills Education), a joint venture between the Wisconsin Technical College System and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, made great headway in forging links between the education, business and government sectors. Through a \$1 million grant from the Joyce Foundation, RISE collaborated with business representatives, public agencies, and higher education officials to share information that created a new vision for how low-skilled, low-wage-earning Wisconsin residents acquired skills to attain better paying jobs. Through its research, RISE found that industry's skill needs were often divided between highly-skilled and low-skilled jobs. But there was no clearly defined pathway for how one might move up the ladder. In response, the partnership compared the Wisconsin Technical College System's existing curricula with the skill sets that employers required *at multiple levels* within the industry. They worked with regional businesses to create a mirror-like system where workers could move systematically from low-skilled to high skilled jobs in a stepwise fashion. In addition, as workers attained a new skill level, they would attain a new credential that would be

recognized regionally within a particular industry (e.g., mechanical engineering). Employers benefited by a larger pool of qualified workers; a better pipeline to fill skilled jobs from within; and higher retention and employee loyalty. Workers benefited by having a predictable path to job advancement and higher wages; more employer support; easier access to education; and more security. (RISE Partnership Resources, n.d.)

Conclusion

Community colleges can no longer address local education and workforce development priorities in isolation. They must work with partners from a variety of sectors to develop more responsive and relevant programs. Overall, they have done well in meeting the needs of many distinct constituencies, but demands for more collaboration continue from all sectors (Orr). Businesses and trade associations are demanding better-skilled workers as well as a dependable source for locating better-skilled, productive workers. They are equally interested in keeping their current workers' skills up-to-date so they can promote from within and increase employee loyalty. Businesses are urging community colleges to become even more market- and consumer-driven organizations. Certainly, forming and sustaining collaborative efforts is complex and time-consuming, but as common goals are formed and realized, the outcome can transform a community as no one entity could accomplish on its own.

Next Steps

I. Economic decline and its effects on community colleges. While researching this project, the U.S. economy was struck by one of the worst economic crises in decades when the housing market crashed and several major financial institutions went bankrupt. It has reportedly triggered what could become one of the worst global recessions since the Great

Depression. Ironically, I was reading that community colleges often benefit in times of economic decline because job losses encourage laid-off workers to return to school to be retrained. I would like to further explore how a recession might impact a community college's relationships with internal and external constituencies and how I might capitalize on this as a job developer.

II. Bristol Community College strategic planning initiative. BCC recently unveiled a new strategic planning initiative for 2009-2011. According to BCC administrators, it is a remarkable departure from previous approaches to strategic planning because it rejects a top-down approach and embraces a systems approach where members of the college community realize the interconnectedness of their efforts. That is, a change in one part of the system affects every part of the system, demanding thoughtful reflection and transparent, effective communication.

The Plan has three central goals:

(A) Engage Students, Faculty, and Staff in a Learning-Centered and Learner-Centered College;

(B) Transform Support for Engagement; and

(C) Transform Opportunity.

The last goal, *Transform Opportunity*, seeks to make BCC the community's first choice for workforce development and opportunity by: (a) increasing community awareness and understanding of programs, services, and opportunities; and (b) creating a liaison system to the College with external constituencies. (Bristol Community College Strategic Planning Committee, 2008).

As Coordinator of Job Placement, it is my responsibility to develop and implement projects that support this goal. I feel this research project has laid a foundation to help me do so because I have a fuller understanding of the roles that community colleges play, their strengths in the community and how they can be used as leverage, and the various ways they collaborate with business and industry, government and non-profit entities, and other educational institutions. Next semester, I would like to expand on this research and identify strategies to sell our student's skills to employers and encourage them to think of BCC as their first choice for workforce development.

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