

A call to streamline community college training programs

By MATTHEW DEMBICKI, Published June 18, 2010



Jamie Merisotis of Lumina Foundation for Education says it is essential to help displaced workers attain college credentials faster.

Community colleges can likely better serve displaced workers by offering prescribed curricula, creating block schedules and moving students through training programs in cohorts, according to presidents of a major education foundation and an organization that focuses on increasing college completion rates.

The goal of such reform is to get workers trained and into jobs as quickly as possible, said Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of [Lumina Foundation for Education](#), and Stan Jones, president of [Complete College America](#), who spoke June 18 in Washington, D.C., on a panel discussing postsecondary education and job training.

“Many of the programs take too long to finish,” Merisotis said.

Merisotis and Jones outlined a plan in the [June edition](#) of *Washington Monthly* to revamp community college efforts to serve unemployed workers and those needing skills upgrades and ways federal policy changes could support these efforts. Their strategy targets combining the strengths of community colleges—low-cost and open access—with the strengths of nonprofit education institutions—developing high-demand programs and focused curricula.

A closer look at Tennessee

Merisotis and Jones cited Tennessee’s system of 27 technology centers, which focus on one-year certifications and diplomas in high-demand fields, compared to the state’s academically oriented community colleges. Classes at the centers are scheduled in blocks and at times that are most convenient for students, who move through the program as a cohort.

In addition, the centers are run on trimester schedules and offer 55 occupational programs that are based on local industry needs. Students attain their credential when they master competencies, said Carol Puryear, director of the [Tennessee Technology Center at Murfreesboro](#).

Although the focus is on skills for specific jobs, academic lessons are embedded in the work so students develop a comprehensive understanding, Puryear said. The centers also offer apprenticeships and use data on job placement, income and other indicators to fine tune their programs, she said.

The centers' successes speak for itself: 75 percent of students who enroll graduate, and 83 percent of them find jobs in their selected fields and still hold those jobs a year later, Puryear said.

The technology centers are just one model that community colleges can adapt, Merisotis said, noting that Lumina is examining other potential solutions to get workers trained quickly and into jobs. This fall, [Ivy Tech Community College](#) will pilot a three-year program—funded by Lumina and Indiana Commission for Higher Education—to help students enrolled in certain programs to attain an a two-year degree in one year.

“We need to take these programs...and scale them up pretty dramatically for the country,” said Jones, a former Indiana higher education commissioner. “There’s an opportunity here.”

Funding reform

Paying for such reforms when many community colleges are struggling to serve more students with less public funding is a challenge. But the panelists—which included James Kvaal from the White House National Economic Council, who next month will serve as the deputy under secretary at the U.S. Department of Education—said federal policy can help.

Community colleges can use the \$2 billion job training grant program funded by the recently passed health care legislation. When distributing the grants, the president can give priority to community colleges that focus on streamlining programs and emphasis job placement and tracking, Merisotis said. He noted that leaders from several large community college systems are ready to ramp up such accelerated programs within a year with the proper funding.

Click [here](#) to see a brief interview with Jamie Merisotis regarding how community colleges could pay for reforms using the new \$2 billion federal training grants program.

The federal government can also rework rules governing unemployment insurance. Currently, displaced workers can receive federal unemployment benefits if they are looking for and available for work, making it difficult for them to go to college, Merisotis said. The federal government should allow unemployed workers who are enrolled full-time in a one- or two-year degree program to attend college without worrying about losing their benefits, he said.

There is also the issue of ensuring that incumbent workers have the skills to retain their jobs, which are changing rapidly. The federal government could create educational stipends to cover basic expenses of a two-year program, such as tuition. Businesses and industries could also offer employees such stipends to ensure that they have highly skilled workers, he said.

“Government doesn’t have to be the one to provide leadership here,” Merisotis said.

The panel discussion was sponsored by the [New America Foundation](#) and *Washington Monthly*.

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