

Oregon Community Colleges' 21st Century Workforce Development Strategy

*“To provide Oregon’s communities and employers with a
high-skilled, well-trained, and competent workforce
that can compete in the global marketplace and
can support continued economic development and growth.”*

*--Oregon Community Colleges' Workforce Development Strategy
Mission statement, 7/2000*

The creation of a Community College Workforce Development Strategy is a critical next step in positively impacting policy and practice within Oregon. Envisioned as inclusive of the Workforce Investment Act, it is not driven by or limited to the implementation of this federal legislation. The Strategy, as currently conceived by community college leadership statewide, provides a strong, consistent, and coherent voice for Oregon community colleges on the issue of workforce development. The Strategy does not mandate action to individual community colleges; rather, it describes key roles these institutions could take while assuring flexibility and responsiveness to local needs.

Workforce Development is defined as the services that prepare individuals to enter and advance in the workplace, and increase business productivity and competitiveness. As stated in the Oregon Revised Statutes, Oregon’s community colleges are charged with three core comprehensive components: lower division transfer, professional/technical training, and developmental education (ORS 341.009 (1)). Each of these components supports, enhances, and/or directly contributes to workforce development in the state. Since the establishment of Central Oregon and Southwestern Oregon Community Colleges half a century ago, Oregon’s community colleges have responded to the diverse educational needs of their citizenry in local communities throughout the state.

A community college must be responsive and flexible enough to meet the needs of its local constituencies and communities, whether that requires a transfer institution, a workforce development entity, or a community services provider. Recent studies indicate that the vast majority of community college lower-division-transfer and professional-technical students are attending college in order to secure employment, retain a current job, or prepare for upward mobility and advancement. Therefore, there is a need for all elements to come together within each college to ensure a consistent mission and vision, reflecting the wants and needs of the local citizens and business community.

A primary role of community colleges, in Oregon and throughout the country, is to deliver appropriate education and training services that will empower and engage its local citizenry in the community. A high school graduate beginning a career, an incumbent worker seeking an increase in skill levels, a recently laid-off employee who

desires training to reenter the workforce --- all are supported and served by this primary community college role.

A Broader Vision for Community Colleges

Based on requests for technical assistance and a statewide dialogue around community college workforce development issues, Oregon's Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (CCWD) convened a Community College Workforce Development Strategy work group of interested stakeholders in April 2000. This group then convened a larger committee with representatives appointed by the President of each college to set forth a strategic plan framework for the system and community colleges to use in developing a comprehensive statewide approach to Oregon's workforce development system.

The Community College Workforce Development Strategy begins with the premise that economically healthy communities will continue to grow through gainful employment and increasing wage opportunities. In addition, a comprehensive system of services continuously improves the skills of Oregon's workers and employers in response to current and evolving state and local needs. In developing this Strategy, the community colleges seek an end where systems and partners will integrate into a cohesive workforce development system at the regional, state, and local levels, the point where the system will respond to business concerns, technological advancements, and the needs of all workers. This system at the state and local levels must be reflective of local communities, focusing on their needs rather than on federal regulations.

Goal 1: Creating a 21st Century Community College Workforce Development System

As part of the overarching mission of providing Oregon with a "high-skilled, well-trained, and competent workforce that can compete in the global marketplace and support continued economic development and growth," the work group established specific goal statements and strategies. These goals affirmed Oregon's community colleges as primary to the strategy of developing the workforce of the 21st century, with roles that may include:

- Retraining workers to maintain employment or to enter new occupational areas;
- Providing a continuum of training opportunities which promote career ladders and the movement of low income workers into high wage occupations;
- Improving incumbent worker skills to meet changing job demands, avoid employee layoffs, and facilitate career advancement;
- Preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions;
- Providing training opportunities that afford long-term unemployed individuals the chance to secure entry-level employment;

- Partnering with high schools to increase student career opportunities and preparedness;
- Providing specialized career development and academic support services to targeted special populations;
- Upgrading incumbent workers in technological, industrial, and foundational skills;
- Providing a continuum of management training opportunities for business owners to enhance their skills;
- Brokering consulting services which enhance production and ensure a better return on investment;
- Providing “workplace readiness” skill development, enabling individuals to become employed, to stay employed, and to increase employment opportunities;
- Preparing students to enter the workforce after completion of associate degree or certificate programs; and
- Delivering training and training-related services to Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, preparing them to enter or to move up in the workforce.

While Oregon’s community colleges have individually responded to workforce development needs in their respective districts, few if any unified approaches exist from the colleges as a whole. A unified system could result in a comprehensive, consistent delivery mechanism to provide comparable workforce development services regardless of location. Such a system promotes non-duplication of workforce services, increases shared education and training resources among the state’s seventeen community colleges, and enhances responsiveness to local needs through system connections. Employers could be ensured more consistent and comparable access to services as well, enabling them to compete more effectively in the global marketplace. The need for this comprehensive systematic approach led to the development of Goal #1:

Community colleges will work together and with local partners to develop an Oregon Workforce Development system that is inclusive and comprehensive.

This goal targets the development of a comprehensive workforce system, with clear roles for community colleges and partners, a minimum of service duplication, and a broad infrastructure among partners at both state and local levels. Strategies include clarifying roles of Workforce Development leadership within colleges, with the CCWD, and with the Oregon Community College Association (OCCA); streamlining services and infrastructure among partners to maximize productivity; and ensuring community colleges are full partners in the One-Stop delivery system.

Goal 2: Engaging Partners in the Vision

Oregon community colleges also play a vital role in partnering with state and local government to retain and/or attract new business and industry to the state. In large part, this is accomplished through quality education and training services. Nationally, there is a perception that community colleges evolved from a model promoting transfer and articulation with the university system. From that limited role, Oregon’s community

colleges have evolved into organizations that respond to the needs of business and industry, special student populations, and government agencies as well. This broad community-based mission has led many colleges into new areas, such as welfare reform, career centers, advanced technology centers, services for dislocated workers and displaced homemakers, small-business development centers, and business and industry-specific training.

Increased competition from Internet-based training providers, four-year institutions offering distance learning and degree programs, and the corporate education community will also impact the community college's ability to effectively compete in the workforce arena. There is little doubt that community colleges are motivated and have the potential to effectively respond to this challenge; however, a statewide approach to the delivery of workforce development services would greatly enhance the ability to respond to these challenges in the coming years. It is from this reality that Goal #2 was established by the work group:

Community colleges will be a key provider of workforce education and training, and will work with local and regional workforce partners to provide effective, efficient, and comprehensive workforce services.

Driven by the need to respond to the competition as well as the customer, this goal and its associated strategies challenge community colleges to examine existing structures, consider alternatives, and embrace change as a part of its broader mission. The Oregon Department of Community Colleges & Workforce Development (CCWD) and its colleges must remain flexible and responsive to customer and community need, working both as a whole and as independent entities. To accomplish this goal, it is critical that community college leadership, the leadership of CCWD and OCCA, and each of the college's workforce development leaders understand the key role workforce development plays within a community college, and within the local and state economies.

Oregon Community Colleges' Workforce Development Strategy: A Call to Action

The underlying theme for the Community College Workforce Development Strategy work group, supported by the Presidents' Council, is the need for a clear, strong, unified voice. Not only critical in legislative and funding priorities, this "unity pledge" is imperative as a proactive response to the workforce development needs that exist in every local community in the state. As independent entities or as partners in collaborative efforts, Oregon's community colleges have been and continue to be at the forefront in responding to local workforce and economic development needs.

As a network of independent community colleges, leadership will be provided to ensure that the new performance reporting requirements of the Workforce Investment Act and other federal legislation are established and defined in a manner that does not adversely impact the college's ability to serve local clients. This will also ensure a better

understanding of their overall role by partners within the new state and local workforce development system.

The legislature and chief elected officials need to understand the way community colleges enhance the employability of their constituents and provide a return on investment to their city, county, or state. Therefore, it is equally important that the colleges share local and system-wide data with the legislature and the business community that further inform them of the community college's role in community and economic development strategies. This will help ensure that these colleges continue to receive adequate funds to support credit and non-credit-based programming, business and industry services, and the wide range of programs, services, and activities that respond to workforce needs and interests.

Regardless of how well a community college's continuing education, workforce development, contract training, or business/industry services department markets and delivers services to the community, those services can only reach their full potential with the active support of the college's president, administration and faculty. Over the next year, each community college must involve administrators, faculty and staff in discussions about changes in the education and training environment that will impact the college. Based on demographics, customer research (including students, local employers and One-Stop partners), and market demand, this may result in the need to restructure programs, change or enhance delivery modes, or re-allocate resources.

The need for a cohesive workforce development system at the regional, state, and local levels is driven by a changing technological economy, responses to community needs, the WIA, and competition from other educational providers. Nevertheless, it demands a unified vision and voice, beginning at the local college level and engaging local, regional, and statewide partners. To those community colleges who have taken the lead in workforce development activities, the challenge may be to find ways to do it better: sharing and expanding successful models and best practices, broadening external partnerships and alliances, actively educating legislators and local officials. To those who have just begun to engage local partners, the work may lie in building capacity, educating faculty and staff, and engaging the local community. All must be unified by the need to respond to the Community Colleges' Workforce Development Mission: To provide Oregon's communities and employers with a high-skilled, well-trained, and competent workforce that can compete in the global marketplace and support continued economic development and growth.