Community Colleges: A Look Ahead

A conversation with five leaders in education

Recently, the Brookings Foundation issued a policy brief that analyzed likely trends in supply and demand for workers with different levels of education and skills. The paper concluded there will be a robust demand for middle-skill workers, those who generally require some education and training beyond high school but less than a bachelor’s degree. Middle-skills job categories, which make up approximately half of all employment, include clerical, sales, construction, installation/repair, production, and transportation/material moving.¹

Demand for these middle-skill workers is already outpacing the supply of trained workers. Siemens Corp., the U.S. arm of Germany’s Siemens AG, recently reported it is struggling to fill over 3,000 job openings all over the country. More than half require science, technology, engineering, and math-related skills. Other manufacturers looking for skilled workers report job vacancies that range from six to 200, with some positions open for at least nine months.²

Other U.S. companies share the Siemens experience. A report in The New York Times on why companies have difficulty manufacturing in the U.S. notes the lack of a technical workforce as one of the biggest barriers. “In particular,” the author notes, “companies say they need engineers with more than high school, but not necessarily a bachelor’s degree.” A quote from an Apple executive underscores the issue: “The U.S. has stopped producing people with the skills we need.”³

In recent years, community colleges have increasingly become active in the battle to keep America competitive internationally by training middle-skill workers. Community college-based Tech Prep programs, a planned sequence of study in a technical field beginning as early as the ninth year of school, can extend through two years of postsecondary occupational education, and culminate in an associate degree or certificate.

Partnerships with local business and industry are another unique aspect of the community college experience, with advisory committees made up of local business and industry representatives providing advice and support to vocational programs. Apprenticeship or intern programs also contribute to the development of the middle-skills workforce.

Despite the impressive growth of community colleges in recent years, they are facing daunting challenges. New curricula are needed to match the escalating rate of developments in society, commerce, and technology. Online learning increases annually, raising the question of how colleges will adapt their built environment to accommodate this shift in pedagogy. The rate of change in our society seems to grow exponentially. To better understand the evolving mission of community colleges and the challenges they face, Herman Miller recently spoke with five community college leaders.

Ruth Prather is Provost at Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida, an institution recently ranked second in the nation in the number of associate’s degrees conferred.
Sandra Gaskin is Executive Director of the National Council for Continuing Education and Training (NCCET).

Kathryn Jo Mannes heads the American Association of Community Colleges Center for Workforce and Economic Development.

Gerardo de los Santos is President and Chief Executive Officer of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

Andrew L. Meyer is Vice President for Learning at Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland, and is also the Board Chair of the Global Corporate College, a nationwide consortium of community colleges that offers training to major corporations at multiple locations throughout the country.

Herman Miller: There are plenty of reports about how education is failing to prepare graduates for the workforce. How can community colleges address this issue?

Sandra Gaskin: We must ensure that when students graduate they will have employable skills. Faculty will need to stay in touch with the world of work if they are to develop truly contemporary curricula. Our membership provides non-credit customized training across the board—from small businesses to major corporations at multiple locations throughout the country.

Herman Miller: Technology is changing so much of our lives and certainly the way people learn. How is technology affecting learning at community colleges?

Ruth Prather: Technology is a big enabler for faculty that accelerates curriculum development and implementation. At Valencia, we have implemented Technology Resource Centers at all our campuses where faculty development is supported by instructional designers who assist faculty in developing curriculum with appropriate technology solutions. Today’s faculty must demonstrate strong technology skills to keep pace.

Gerardo de los Santos: We see the growth of hybrid learning, a combination of asynchronous and in-person learning activities. Hybrid approaches to learning will be strong, combining the flexibility, access, and efficiency of digital connectivity with the onsite benefits of student services for a growing number of first-generation students. In the process, these students are improving their social engagement and non-cognitive skills.

Herman Miller: The classroom of the future will undoubtedly look different than ones currently in use today. Given the body of evidence that shows that students learn best in environments that foster collaboration and peer-to-peer learning, what do you see as the future of educational facilities at community colleges?

Kathryn Jo Mannes: Now, more than ever, colleges need to align their curriculum planning and development with job preparation and labor market expectations. We need to accommodate special populations that are making new demands on the workplace—veterans, older workers, immigrants, etc. One way to level the playing field is by using technology to make it increasingly easy for people to learn when and where they can.
Andrew Meyer: The classroom of the future will contain the next generation of technologies. The problem is we just don’t know what those technologies are yet. The future collaborative learning environment will require new configurations of classroom furniture and equipment conducive to learners working effectively in small groups on applied learning projects and individual assignments while connecting with peers and mentors instantaneously.

Gerardo de los Santos: The classroom of the future may very well be a blended milieu of digital, socially networked communities that take technology to new levels of learning augmentation, in which the roles of faculty and students evolve toward different approaches to how classroom time is focused and how learning content is delivered. As a result, students are more likely to take increased responsibility for their own learning.

Ruth Prather: We are already seeing technology change our learning spaces. At our campuses we are using Quick Response (QR) Codes for multiple purposes, many of them instructional. Whatever the trend, our facilities will need to be retrofitted to provide maximum flexibility and comfort. Students of the future will use technology intuitively, be constantly connected, want experiential learning, and won’t relate to the traditional lecture mode. We need to provide facilities that match their expectations and abilities. Classrooms aren’t going away; they’ll evolve into a new way to house learning.

Herman Miller: You all seem enamored of technology and what it can do for students and faculty. But is technology an unmitigated good in the community college environment?

Sandra Gaskin: I am fascinated by the concept of “teaching naked” (not literally!). Teachers remove computers, technology and PowerPoint from the classroom, videotape or podcast lectures for asynchronous delivery, and use real class time for discussion, questioning, exploring, collaborating, and interacting. This gives you a blank slate on which you can design the room to accommodate these interactive modalities.

Andrew L. Meyer: Community colleges will expand their role into corporate training. We all grew up in the days of face-to-face, seat-time education. To be sure, online learning has grown but the trend to hybrid learning ensures continued use of facilities. How we design and furnish those facilities is the key to future success.

CONCLUSION

America’s community colleges are providing educational service to local citizens and beyond them, to the United States and the world. Today, a modern community college will have the usual classrooms and laboratories, but a visitor will also see learning studios, art galleries, day care centers, community meeting facilities, corporate training centers, and even the presence of universities offering graduate programs.

While times and pedagogies will change, these facilities will evolve to meet the challenge of a rapidly changing society. In a sense, the built environment found at America’s almost 1,200 community and technical colleges will need to be “future proof”—able to quickly adapt to the learning and training needs of their communities. Now more than a century old, these descendants of the original “junior college” are the most affordable and accessible form of higher education in the world, a unique American contribution to the rich history of higher education, one that ensures that all have access to the skills training needed to be productive citizens.

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