

## A serious disconnect in education

By Matthew Dembicki, Published May 7, 2013

Students graduating from high school don't have the math and English skills needed to succeed in their first year at a community college, according to a new report. Meanwhile, two-year colleges are not focusing on the practical math and English skills that students need to succeed in their selected career paths.

The study by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) reaffirmed the dilemma that many community colleges face in addressing developmental education, but it also called on educators to focus on mastery of basic math and English skills and to align them with what's needed on the job. For example, Algebra II is currently required in order to graduate high school in some states, even though less than 5 percent of U.S. workers uses it in their jobs, according to NCEE President Marc Tucker.

The NCEE reports also calls on middle schools to focus on helping students understand math concepts rather than moving them quickly through lessons so they can take Algebra I.

"Let's take the time and do it right," said Phil Daro, a senior mathematics fellow at Pearson-America's Choice and co-chair of the math panel that developed the report. "You have to slow down to go deeper."

James Pellegrino, an education professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago who served on the report's technical advisory committee, agreed.

Recently released resources on common core state standards: Aspen Institute and Student Achievement Partners

**"We're covering a lot of material too quickly, ... and it's not getting mastered," he said.**

English preparation doesn't fare better. Most of the time, English assignments and tests are watered down to just memorizing facts and finding information rather than collecting and analyzing information and writing a conclusion, the report said. There is little processing and almost no critiquing of what students' read and no extended writing, said Catherine Snow, an education professor at Harvard University who served as co-chair of the report's English panel. For example, an auto mechanic needs the skills to write a report about an engine malfunction and the steps needed to fix it, she said.

### **Pool of future workers**

NCEE President Marc Tucker said the report focuses on community colleges because they are at the crux of higher education. About 45 percent of U.S. undergraduates attend community colleges, and roughly half are trained to go directly into the workforce in popular fields such as nursing and law enforcement, according to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). The rest transfer to a baccalaureate institution.

Of the 20 fastest-growing professions, 12 required an associate degree or higher, according to the College Board. However, about 60 percent of community college students take at least one developmental course.

The increased need for developmental education has, in part, led to less rigor across many other courses at community colleges, prompting instructors to develop "workarounds" with tools such as PowerPoint and videos, rather than requiring reading and writing, according to the NCEE report.

Much of the critique matched with AACC's own recent evaluation of two-year colleges. The association said high school and college educators should reevaluate their courses and materials to ensure they meet students' needs to succeed in college and the workforce.

“This study emphasizes the critical importance of better aligning the entire P-20 pipeline to ensure all students are adequately prepared for college and careers,” The state seems to be making progress in this area as high schools are focusing on preparing for college, as opposed to passing a grad exam. AACC President Walter Bumphus said in a statement.

### **AACC's report Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation's Future**

Last year, AACC released its bellwether 21st-Century Initiative report outlining the challenges and goals of community colleges. The association is currently developing implementation strategies to assist two-year colleges to implement the report's recommendations to improve student success. Most of these proven strategies are just plain common sense approaches to instruction that need to become commonplace across all institutions. The difficulty has been changing faculty paradigms that see college as a place where students must adapt to whatever method the instructor feels they are comfortable with, regardless of its effectiveness. Although we were able to get away with this approach throughout the latter parts of last century, this 21<sup>st</sup> Century Report makes it very clear that is not the case now. AACC plans to release its report next April at its annual convention in Washington, D.C.

Many community colleges are already starting to revamp their programs and courses, (Include WCC as one of these) noted Kathryn Mannes, senior vice president for workforce and economic development at AACC, who participated on one of the panels on Tuesday in conjunction with the release of the NCEE report. A growing number of two-year colleges are working with business and industry to train their workforce; partnering with four-year institutions on articulation agreements; and designing ways to help students move through the system more efficiently, such as offering credit for prior learning experiences.

Mannes also noted that not all high school students enroll at community colleges right after graduation. Many return years later to upgrade their skills or knowledge, or to acquire skills for new careers. In fact, the average age of a community college student is 28.

### **Working together**

Participants on several of Tuesday's panels noted that reform will require an “intense effort” from all education sectors. Panelists discussed the role of faculty and teacher education programs in reforming education. Implementing change also includes higher education and K-12 working together more closely.

Rufus Glasper, chancellor of Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona, noted that his system uses its resources to work with K-12 faculty on preparing students for college through course development and orientation, among other efforts. The district is currently revamping its math sequence, with an eye on developmental education to help students who have already mastered the content to move more quickly into math courses they need, he said.

Highlighting the importance of community colleges in workforce and economic development is a struggle, Glasper said. For example, the district is in a consortium that received a federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant to focus on workforce training for the nuclear energy field. That includes preparing welders for the field, who need to know algebra for the job. However, employers are struggling to find highly skilled welders for high-paying careers in nuclear energy.

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