

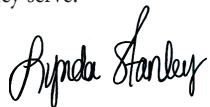
October 2008

# The Role of Community Colleges in Combating Poverty

## Introduction

As our nation faces the prospect of a significant economic downturn, will community college governing boards be able to continue expanding efforts to combat poverty in the United States? Will education still be the primary key to improving the quality of life for the vast majority of people? Community colleges play a major role in the fight against poverty because they serve as economic engines in communities throughout the country. What should the future agenda for combating poverty in America involve?

The Association of Community College Trustees developed this discussion paper to lend context to the 2008 ACCT Annual Leadership Congress. ACCT's esteemed keynote speakers and presenters of over 80 educational sessions will examine aspects of the complex issue of poverty and the ways in which community college leaders can work to eliminate poverty through education and training. This paper serves as an introductory overview to poverty and the role community colleges play in combating poverty. It is intended to provoke further investigation by and discussions among community college leaders into what works, and to suggest innovative approaches to serving disadvantaged and at-risk students-under-served populations-while strengthening the financial well-being of families in the communities they serve.



Lynda Stanley, ACCT Chair 2007-08  
Brunswick Community College, NC

## Background

In 2007, 37.3 million people lived below the poverty line in America.<sup>1</sup> The poverty line is defined as a household of four earning less than \$21,200 annually. The reality is that, to provide for a family, at least twice this amount of income may be required in many if not most areas of the country. In addition, the number of middle-class families that are one-to-two paychecks away from financial disaster also has increased. Experts agree that poverty in America is affected by "mega-trends" that extend well beyond the reach of average citizens to affect or conquer. These mega-trends, defined below, challenge policymakers and community college leaders to think beyond what may have worked best historically in the battle against poverty, and look ahead to what might work best in the future.

### Mega-Trends

*Global Financial Interdependence*-The global financial crisis points to how rapidly government revenues and social investments can decline,

putting increased pressure on non-defense program spending.

*Globalization*-Increasing global competition and interdependence continue to reshape the nation's economy. Resultant downsizing and outsourcing are collapsing the number of low-skill jobs that were once sufficient to sustain families and individuals.

*The Digital Divide*-The rapid pace of technology is accelerating the "digital divide," leading to the division of those who have technology and those who do not. This divide falls largely along socio-economic lines and impedes access to information, education, and training for those who live on limited resources.

*Immigration*-Immigration is reconfiguring the distribution of low-income individuals in communities across the nation, bringing along a new set of language and cultural challenges.

*Demographic Shifts*-Changing demographics within many local populations, influenced in part by immigration trends, continues to redefine communities in a multitude of ways that challenge the status quo. The increasing number of immigrants within affected localities brings with it many new low-skilled workers and language barriers, further affecting poverty and increasing the demand for remedial education that is available at a lower cost to a more diverse array of people.

*Aging of America*-The first wave of the "Baby Boom" generation has begun to retire, shifting attention to healthcare and retirement income needs.

*Remediation*-An increasing need for remedial education suggests that growing numbers of individuals must invest greater resources to gain the skills necessary to succeed economically in a rapidly changing labor market.

Community college trustees know that building capacity at the community-college level is one critical way by which American workers can break the cycle of poverty and find sustainable, high-paying jobs. However, investing appropriately and responsibly in the face of such need can be an enormous challenge. Should the college invest more resources into recruiting high-need students? Build a more robust and increasingly more innovative financial assistance program? Fight attrition of particular subsets of students? Or does the answer lie in building partnerships with local businesses to secure jobs for graduates?

College boards face a unique set of challenges that require solutions tailored to specific community needs. This discussion paper is not intended to provide comprehensive strategies, but rather to offer an overview of the role that community colleges play in combating poverty. Examples are provided to highlight some of the multitude of strategies currently being undertaken by community colleges around the country.

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Census. August 2008 Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

The examples that follow serve to highlight programs that have demonstrated success and have been acknowledged by esteemed organizations including the Lumina Foundation, the MetLife Foundation, and others which share similar goals. They are but windows into the possibilities community colleges may consider exploring in efforts to remedy the varied contributors to poverty in communities. These examples can inform as well as serve as replicable models for success.

Finally, a "checklist" is provided to help guide community college boards, and to offer guidance on the appropriate role boards should play in serving their communities in helping to combat poverty. The goal is to help trustees-the stewards of the academic and financial well-being of community college-in making smart investments that yield positive outcomes for high-need students.

### THE POVERTY CONTEXT

Poverty is defined by the Federal Poverty Level, adjusted annually, and includes individuals living in the 48 contiguous states earning less than \$10,400 annually, or a family or household of four earning less than \$21,200.<sup>2</sup> Poverty remains a pervasive challenge for communities all across America, and the current trend is an increase in the number of poverty-stricken people rather than a decrease: the number of people living in poverty increased from 36.5 million to 37.3 million between 2006 and 2007.<sup>3</sup>

While 25.1 percent of families with heads-of-households with less than a high school diploma live below the poverty line, 12.3 percent of families with heads-of-households who hold a high school diploma live below the poverty line. Among householders with some college or an associate's degree, the poverty rate is 8.3 percent.

Poverty rates differ among racial, ethnic, and age groups. The number of seniors (those over age 65) living in poverty increased from 3.4 million in 2006 to 3.6 million 2007. The poverty rate among non-Hispanic whites was 8.2 percent in 2007. However, among African Americans, the poverty rate is 24.5 percent; Hispanics/Latinos, 21.5 percent; and Asians, 10.2 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The nature of poverty demands multiple strategies and innovative responses-two hallmarks of the community college institution. Located in virtually every community across the United States, community colleges provide critical community-based resources and centers for helping to address the needs of individuals and families seeking to move from dependency and diminished prospects to economic self-sufficiency and the promise of the "American Dream."

### COMMUNITY COLLEGE IMPACT

Community colleges have long been viewed as catalysts for change. Whether the stepping stone to a four-year institution, the rest stop where job skills are honed to give a boost up the career ladder, or a place to gain technical skills or critical English-language proficiency, community

colleges provide a foundation for future academic and career success.

Though students' motivations for enrolling in community college vary widely, economic advancement is usually the desired outcome. And with good reason: data show that workers with an associate's degree earned on average \$8,653 more per year than their counterparts with only a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) in 2006.<sup>5</sup> Adults with a higher level of education are more likely to be fully employed, rely less on social services, and contribute more to the U.S. tax revenue base.<sup>6</sup> **With 6.5 million students enrolled full time in public, two-year colleges in the United States, and 5 million part time students, it is clear that community colleges not only advance the economic well-being of the students they serve, but also help to drive the U.S. economy.**

Total Average Earnings for People Ages 18 and Over in the U.S., 2006.

High School Dropout:	\$20,901
High School Graduate or GED:	\$31,071
Associates Degree:	\$39,724
Bachelor's Degree:	\$56,788

Source: U.S. Census - Annual Social and Economic (ASEC) Supplement. Table PINC-04. 2006.

Community colleges combat poverty by serving students at the bottom of the income ladder, where an incremental increase in educational attainment can yield enormous financial dividends. In fact, slightly over half of all community college students nationwide are from the bottom two income quartiles, compared with 9 percent of all students attending a four-year institution.<sup>7</sup>

How have community colleges managed to attract a disproportionate distribution of low-income students? Because they offer competitive and cutting-edge educational opportunities at an affordable tuition, community colleges are able to attract high-school graduates and workers alike looking to invest in their future. With a lower cost in terms of both tuition and time commitment, disadvantaged students are more likely to view a community college education as an affordable and worthwhile investment.

### COMMUNITY COLLEGES AS RESPONDERS TO ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

As the resource centers for skill building and job training, community colleges serve a vital role in periods of economic downturn. Historically, community colleges see their enrollments increase when the economy slows down. Typically, enrollment increases by double digits as more economically vulnerable individuals turn to community colleges in order to retrain, re-tool, or learn new skills and competencies for re-employment.

As dynamic organizations with in-depth knowledge of local workforce trends, community colleges are uniquely positioned to respond to

<sup>2</sup> Federal Register, Vol. 73, No. 15, January 23, 2008, pp. 3971-3972.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census. August 2008 Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census. August 2008 Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census. Annual Social and Economic (ASEC) Supplement. Table PINC-04. 2006.

<sup>6</sup> NACAC. "Knowledge is Power: Educating All Americans." National Association for College Admission Counseling 2005 Legislative Conference Report.

<sup>7</sup> Carnevale, A., and Rose, S. "Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions." In R. Kahlenberg (ed.), *America's Untapped Resource: Low- Income Students in Higher Education*. New York: Century Foundation, 2004.

variability in the economy. These incredibly nimble and responsive colleges did not exist as a major education and training resource 50 years ago. As community colleges grew and expanded into communities across the nation during the 1960s and 1970s, the United States gained a vital ally that is able to address workforce and training needs quickly and effectively. Known for their training and specialization, particularly in high-demand industries and technology-driven fields, community colleges can assist workers struggling to improve their financial situation and provide for their families. Community and technical colleges that are attuned to the needs of the community can offer training resources for new and up-and-coming local industries. As the vanguard for addressing employment trends, community colleges are able to provide the skill advancement necessary for workers to overcome economic and social obstacles and escape the cycle of poverty.

## TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Helping students meet their academic and professional goals is a philosophy deeply embedded in each and every community college mission, and helping to combat poverty at the community level is a positive outcome of these efforts. The responsibility to serve those stuck on the bottom rungs of the career ladder has led many community colleges to take steps to recruit, retain, counsel, and graduate students who are economically disadvantaged.

### Recruitment

Increasingly, community colleges are reaching out into underserved populations and locations in order to recruit people who want to make an educational investment in their future.

- ❖ **Innovative Approaches to Providing Financial Support, Scholarship and Financial Aid.** Making students and families aware of financial aid opportunities and helping them to fill out paperwork has attracted a new set of students to community colleges. The complexity of student financial aid programs remains a major hindrance: "Many families do not understand the complexities of the financial aid process and thus feel completely overwhelmed by the process. Sometimes families will forgo the opportunity for aid rather than attempt to navigate this system."<sup>8</sup> The good news is that many new and exciting partnerships - with public school systems, local businesses, local and state governments, and foundations - is facilitating awareness of available financial resources, and exposing people to financial options available for post-secondary education. Unfortunately, too many students must overcome other financial barriers, including credit-card debt, lack of basic transportation, child-care, and the need to work full or part-time time while in college in order to make ends meet for them and/or their families.
- ❖ **Outreach to Disadvantaged Communities.** Targeting subgroups with the highest rates of poverty has proved a challenging recruitment effort. Immigrant populations, the homeless or formerly homeless, the formerly incarcerated, drop-out youth, and the disabled are at the highest risk of falling below the poverty line, and yet, have the most to gain by enrolling in a community college.

Specialized outreach to these populations, either through personalized visits, presence at career fairs, native language outreach materials have helped to recruit these high-need populations. Innovative new strategies, such as taking advantage of community-based sectors, such as churches, barber shops and beauty parlors, ethnic and/or cultural heritage festivals, and sponsoring community health fairs or free immunizations and check-ups, also prove helpful in reaching out to disadvantaged students. Cultural sensitivity is critical to increasing the likelihood that such outreach efforts will be successful in reaching the very student populations most in need within their local communities and neighborhoods.

- ❖ **Reactionary Outreach.** Businesses closures or massive layoffs in a community signal another opportunity for college recruitment and serving the community. Quick, effective and relevant reaction by the college raises the likelihood of attracting the notice of communities and potential students. Community colleges have responded by tailoring their programs and recruitment to the specific conditions of local employers. By creating and promoting community-relevant skill enhancement during economic downturns, community colleges have helped to alleviate unemployment and improve future earning for the community as a whole.

### Retaining Economically Disadvantaged and At-Risk Students

As any community college trustee, administrator, or faculty member can attest, enrollment is only the first step to lifting a student out of poverty. With so many pressures on students-such as the challenge of finding child care or accommodating students' part-time or full-time jobs-fighting to retain high-need, high-risk students can be an uphill battle, but one well worth the effort.

**Providing Greater Flexibility.** Understanding the varied pressures on students and providing flexibility with program requirements are the keys to retaining high-need students. For example, some colleges have opted to create individualized plans for students who have extenuating circumstances or to provide supportive services such as counseling, mentoring, and childcare for students struggling to meet the varied demands of their day while attending college. Part-time programs, extension centers located within the community, and online courses are some of the ways in which colleges have worked to make an associate's degree or certificate program accessible for all students.

**The Importance of Intervention.** Retaining high-need, or at-risk students requires vigilance on the part of administrators and faculty alike. Some colleges have instituted programs whereby, if a student begins to slip in coursework or attendance, administrators or faculty intervene quickly with the student to find the source of the problem. Colleges often used this technique to help to guide students to find their niche within the college and an appropriate track leading to greater success and employment. Studies and experience show that when a student feels connected or can identify with a peer, faculty, or an advisor, the likelihood for success increases. In short, the challenge rests in finding the appropriate individual or role model who can encourage missing minority males, high school

<sup>8</sup> Kane, J. Thomas. *The Price of Admission*. Washington: D.C. Brookings Institution Press. 1999

drop-outs, the technologically disadvantaged or disenfranchised, to believe that the community college can serve as the gateway to economic self-sufficiency and upward mobility.

### **Job Counseling**

Whether a graduating student is looking to his or her first or twentieth full-time job, community colleges can provide assistance that can make the difference.

- ❖ **One-on-One Help.** Community college personnel have provided hands-on help for students by providing individualized job counseling and assistance. Career-path counseling, mock interviews, and resume review have proven especially helpful for students looking to their next move after their community college experience. Social skills, dressing for success, exposure to the world of work also are critical skills that contribute to greater success as students move from the classroom to the workplace, or career world.
- ❖ **Job Placement Opportunities.** Through effective career service offices, colleges can effectively serve as the intermediary between employers and graduating students, helping to fill the dual need for vacant positions in the area and meaningful employment for students.
- ❖ **Workforce Development.** Earning an associate's degree is not the only pathway to economic self-sufficiency. Workforce development programs-career and technical credit and certificate programs-also provide important on-ramps to occupational sectors in a wide variety of businesses and companies, and can be just as valuable in helping individuals find meaningful and economically productive work within their communities.

### **Moving Beyond the Community College**

An associate's degree or certificate is the gateway to employment or a baccalaureate degree, but it can be a challenge to move high-need students successfully from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities because of the many obstacles in their path towards graduation or transfer.

- ❖ **Pushing for Graduation.** Although enrolling in community college coursework is a valuable investment in one's future, the return on investment is much higher when a degree or certificate is obtained. Encouraging students to graduate is one way that trustees, administrators, faculty, and counselors alike have helped improve the economic outlook for the students they serve.
- ❖ **Making the Transition.** Some students lack the self-confidence to take the next step in their education when a baccalaureate or graduate degree is wanted or needed. Articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions are an important mechanism that both reduces the financial burdens on students who then do not need to repeat coursework and eases the transition among institutions, further diminishing the barriers-both real and psychological. Such agreements can greatly reduce the prospect of otherwise qualified students suspending or forgoing the opportunity to continue their postsecondary education beyond the community college.

## **Charleston Clemente Project Trident Technical College, South Carolina**

### INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Location: Charleston, South Carolina

Student body: 12,000 students

Percentage of minority students: 34%

Percentage of students receiving financial aid: 69.5%

Dr. Mary Ann Kohli, an English professor at Trident Technical College, strongly believes that achieving intellectual freedom is the first step to undoing the binds of poverty. That is why, in 2005, she encouraged Trident Technical College to launch the Charleston Clemente Project, offering two tuition-free college-level courses in the humanities for 30 disadvantaged students each year.

The initiative recruits students by posting flyers at a variety of social service organizations in the community, including homeless shelters, a battered women's shelter, and veteran's organizations. Clemente's courses are rigorous and expectations are high - students are expected to read and discuss topics ranging from philosophy to Shakespeare to art history and more. Support is plentiful, and students receive first-rate teaching, one-on-one mentorships, free refurbished computers, and free bus passes along with their free courses.

Kohli believes that the biggest enemy her program faces is fear of failure. The Clemente program therefore aims to give students much more than just college credit; it helps give them self-confidence and an academic curiosity that will serve them in their next job, or as they pursue a degree in higher education. "For Clemente students, assistance is no longer seen as coming from the outside, but as bubbling up from the inside," says Kohli. "Self-worth is contagious, and my students catch it at some point in the course and spread it to others."

Not surprisingly, graduation rates at the Charleston Clemente Project are high. More than 65 percent graduate, and many students go on to pursue an associate's degree at Trident Technical College or another community college, and some pursue a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution. Due to its success, the Charleston Clemente Project was recently able to expand its reach and become the Southeast Regional Clemente Center. Kohli hopes that this will encourage other colleges in the region to take the steps to become Clemente Centers so that resources can be shared among college and more needy students can benefit from the experience.

Trident Tech College

Contact: Dr. Mary Ann Kohli-[maryann.kohli@tridenttech.edu](mailto:maryann.kohli@tridenttech.edu) or 843-720-5713

On the Web: [www.tridenttech.edu/6238.htm](http://www.tridenttech.edu/6238.htm)

Recognitions: Service Learning Award by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education (March 6, 2008)

## UBS Student Success Center Norwalk Community College, Connecticut

### INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Location: Norwalk and Stamford, Connecticut

Student Body: 6,300

Percentage of minority students: 51%

Percentage of students receiving financial aid: 50%

Although many community colleges improve the economic situations of their students, Norwalk Community College (NCC) has the data to prove its efficacy at doing so. According to a recent report commissioned by the college, students see their annual income increase \$334 for every credit completed at NCC. And it doesn't end there. The report also states that, over the course of an NCC student's career, average lifetime earnings will increase \$8.10 for every \$1 invested in the NCC education. NCC students were shown to generate about \$35.9 million annually in higher earnings due to their NCC education.

The cause of NCC's success, explains President David Levinson, is the emphasis on improving student success at all levels within the college setting. "The success of our students is going to net not only a valuable life for them, but it will also allow the community to prosper and thrive. In other words, the success of our students is tantamount to the success of the community."

To build upon the student success model, NCC created the UBS Student Success Center, which was made possible through grants from UBS and the Nellie Mae Foundation. The Center takes a case-management approach, offering students a one-stop career and academic counseling service tailored to their specific needs. Although at first the Center served only the most at-risk students - those on academic probation and at risk of dropping out - NCC has now opened the Center to a broad range of students looking for help and support as they develop their educational plan.

NCC also reaches out to the community to enroll disadvantaged populations and take advantage of the student-success model. In January 2008, NCC worked in tandem with the Norwalk Emergency Shelter to enroll 14 residents at the homeless shelter for college-credit classes. The model for this program is the same as that of all programs within the college: to provide high-quality academic opportunities that focus on student success and student outcomes.

Norwalk Community College

Contact: President David L. Levinson-dlevinson@ncc.commnet.edu or (203)857-7003

On the Web: [www.ncc.commnet.edu](http://www.ncc.commnet.edu)

Recognitions: "Achieving the Dream"

\*The Economic Contribution of Norwalk Community College. Prepared by EMSI, May 2008.

## Appalachian Outreach/Studies Program Sinclair Community College, Ohio

### INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Location: Dayton, Ohio

Student body: 24,000 students on a single campus

Percentage of minority students: 30%

Percentage of students receiving financial aid: 42%

At first blush, it may seem strange that a large, urban community college would have a department dedicated to the study of Appalachian culture and traditions. But Sinclair Community College, located in downtown Dayton, Ohio knows that nearly 40% of the region's population can trace their roots back to Appalachia. Although it is important to stress that not all of Appalachia matches the stereotypical description of a region racked with widespread poverty, it is true that poverty remains a consistent problem for many of the people of Appalachia. Since the 1960s, northern Appalachia in particular has experienced a decline in manufacturing jobs, causing a relative decrease in income and higher poverty levels.

The Appalachian Outreach/Studies program began in 2005 when Sinclair responded to the Dayton community's request for programs that would engage urban Appalachian youth, increase awareness about Appalachia, and celebrate Appalachian heritage. One of the department's proudest achievements is its Think College program, a partnership between the department and the local schools to improve college readiness and reduce the dropout rate for Appalachian youth. Think College allows over 100 high school students to take one college course at Sinclair and simultaneously become teachers and mentors to younger students in the area. The result is that urban Appalachian students gain self-confidence and begin to think of college as an achievable goal, while inspiring younger children to do the same.

Dr. Carol Baugh, the coordinator of Sinclair's Appalachian Outreach/Studies program, encourages colleges to invest in community outreach programs that recognize the potential of students from diverse backgrounds. "Some people think programs like Think College are not the most cost-effective options, but I tell them that they are cost-effective in the long run. When you embed students with the self-confidence to say 'I can go to college,' you are preparing them to enroll in higher education, get jobs within the community, and ultimately contribute to the community."

Dr. Baugh says that working with the community has been the key to the success of the program. "There is no one-size-fits-all approach," she says. "You need to listen to the needs that exist in the community and respond to those needs as best you can."

Sinclair Community College

Contact: Dr. Carol Baugh-carol.baugh@sinclair.edu

On the Web: [www.sinclair.edu/appalachian/](http://www.sinclair.edu/appalachian/)

Recognitions: MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Award (2002)

\*Recent Trends in Poverty in the Appalachian Region: The Implications of the U.S. Census Bureau Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates on the ARC Distressed Counties Designation. Appalachian Regional Commission. August 2000.

## Solar Voltaics Manufacturing Technology Program Portland Community College, Oregon

### INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Location: Portland, Oregon

Student Body: 86,000 students at three campuses

Percentage of minority students: 24%

Percentage of students receiving financial aid: 25%

It's an impressive feat by any standard - amidst a slowing economy and a national housing crisis, the Portland, Oregon area has managed to produce workers in high demand while simultaneously attracting new high-tech businesses to the area. How has the region achieved this level of sustained economic vitality? The answer is due in large part to Portland Community College's involvement and investment in a robust sustainability program that helps thousands of students each year go from high school graduates and low-skilled workers to employees in highly paid green-collar jobs. In doing so, Portland is taking a pro-active approach to combating poverty in its community - providing, in effect, economic triage before conditions worsen for those most at risk of sliding down the income ladder.

PCC's sustainability program spans all three of its campuses and takes an all-inclusive approach to teaching sustainability, incorporating into the program diverse aspects of the trade such as building construction, architectural drafting and design, interior design, and facilities maintenance. The focus is on both academics and workforce development, with many courses tailored precisely to meet the needs of new area businesses looking for specialized skill sets.

One powerful example is PCC's new Solar Voltaics Manufacturing Technology program, which offers a certificate in solar-cell technology, opening the door for employment in the Portland metro area at one of the largest solar manufacturing companies in the country. The curriculum for the Solar Voltaics program was developed in conjunction with the solar company itself, so that skills taught in courses would be directly transferable to company entry-level positions.

"Collaborating with industry is at the heart of curriculum development in emerging fields," says Alliyah Mirza, PCC's sustainability director. However, she stresses that the college's partnerships with federal, state, and local governments, as well as the local schools, are equally important.

It appears these partnerships are strong, as PCC recently received a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation to enhance professional development and training opportunities for faculty at all three campuses in academic areas that promote sustainable building. "As an institution of higher learning, we want to give our students the best education we can to prepare them for the future," Mirza explains. "To do that, and to meet the market demand for greenbuilding, we must keep our faculty at the cutting edge."

Portland Community College

Contact: Alliyah Mirza-alliyah.mirza@pcc.edu

On the Web: <http://www.pcc.edu/about/sustainability>

Recognitions: Recognized in 2006 Digest report of the American Association of Sustainability in Higher Education; MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Award 2002 Finalist.

## Partnership for Business and Industry Training South Texas College, Texas

### INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

Location: Hidalgo and Starr Counties, Texas

Student body: 20,000 students

Percentage of minority students: 95% Hispanic

Percentage of students receiving financial aid: 75%

Before South Texas College was established in 1993, nearly a half million people in rural south Texas did not have access to a community or technical college. With few workforce development opportunities, this mainly Hispanic population had one of the highest unemployment rates in the country - an astonishing 40% in some areas.

Since its establishment, South Texas College has quickly become a lifeline for Hidalgo and Starr counties, offering vital workforce training, liberal arts and vocational degree programs, and career counseling. The focus has been on comprehensive student success, with a special emphasis on graduating students into the workforce or into a bachelor's degree program. Toward these goals, STC has instituted the Partnership for Business and Industry Training, a highly effective matching program for employers and students, as well as created two bachelor's degree programs on campus.

One of the keys to taking students from their first day of classes to graduation day, says President Shirley A. Reed, is data-driven decision making. STC has created a vast data system to track student success along the academic pipeline as well as policy implementation at the administrative level. This qualitative and quantitative analysis informs many of the high-level decisions at STC, and has shown to be a successful management strategy. "It forces us to have courageous conversations," says President Reed.

One of those courageous conversations relates to how STC can help stem the attrition rate of first-generation college students. Data show that although students who complete their courses of study often go on to obtain good jobs and instill the importance of college-going for the next generation, many other students become intimidated by the college campus setting and give up. STC has worked to confront this problem by providing individual attention and support networks for first-generation and other at-risk students.

The underlying belief is that, by helping students overcome their personal challenges to academic success, STC can improve the future for students and their families for generations to come. As Reed explains, "We can combat poverty by doing what has made community colleges great. Treat all students with the respect they deserve and help them achieve the high expectations we must set for them; understand their individual situations; be sensitive to familial and cultural needs; and applaud the heroic effort these students make each day to come to our campuses in pursuit of a brighter future."

South Texas College

Contact: President Shirley A. Reed-956-872-8366

On the Web: [www.southtexascollege.edu/about/](http://www.southtexascollege.edu/about/)

Recognitions: MetLife Foundation Community College Excellence Award (2008) and #21 in *Washington Monthly's* rankings of community colleges. Also an Achieving the Dream initiative participant.

# THE ROLE OF TRUSTEES IN COMBATING POVERTY

## A checklist for community college trustees

A community college board of trustees is the bellwether for success of any new college initiative, including those aimed at helping to alleviate poverty. As a board considers initiatives to combat poverty in the community, the following checklist can assist in the decision-making process:

### **Know Your Community**

Any anti-poverty initiative should set a specific target population to benefit from the college's investment. The college must have an appropriate mechanism for assessing and understanding the needs of the college's service-area population.

For instance, new programs might offer free courses to students below a specific percentage of the national poverty line, target outreach toward individuals most in need or most in risk, or seek to complement services to those dependent upon government assistance. A defined target population will help to better focus services on those that need them most—an ongoing priority of any community college board.

### **Involve the Community**

When considering any new anti-poverty proposal, boards must push for information and guidance as to whether the proposal is the best solution and one that is appropriate to the mission of the college.

Trustees have many connections to their communities. Trustees should interact with residents and stakeholders outside of the board room to "take the pulse" of the community and identify unmet needs. Trustees also need to share success stories with one another and share feedback gathered from community interactions.

### **Define the Standards and College Operations**

Boards endorse the mission of their colleges and any and all programs must fit that mission. Anti-poverty programs do not necessarily need to be designed from scratch, nor must they be funded by the college alone. Many programs—the Trident Technical College's Clemente Project, for example—already exist and may be replicable in new settings. In those cases, boards need to ensure that the college has the infrastructure and staff necessary to support the program, to achieve pre-set benchmarks.

Partnerships with local, state, or federal entities can prove invaluable by allowing the partners to share resources, knowledge, and financial backing. Encouraging the administration to identify strategies for further leveraging opportunities can help shoulder the financial burden, while at the same time, demonstrate good financial stewardship to the community.

### **Utilize Data to Inform Decision Making**

Building a repository of data accessible by trustees, administrators, faculty, and staff is an important way to target new programs effectively and strengthen the decision-making processes. Data may include student-achievement statistics, attrition, graduation and/or transfer rates, and qualitative reviews of existing programs. Data may reveal emerging trends in the community college that can help to guide future anti-poverty initiatives and assist in educating the informing communities about college efforts and priorities.

### **Support and Advocate**

Perhaps the most important job for the board and its member trustees is to advocate for and support the programs and services provided through the college to the community and local and state stakeholders. Programs to combat poverty, like any other college program or service, must have the support of the board, which in turn, must act as advocate and supporter. Board members have multiple ties to the communities they serve. These ties must be used by trustees to build support among and linkages to organizations and policymakers that can help advance the mission of the college and success of programs to combat poverty in their communities.

## MORE INFORMATION

### Achieving the Dream

[www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org)  
919.968.4531

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students. Achieving the Dream works on multiple fronts, including efforts at community colleges and in research, public engagement and public policy. It emphasizes the use of data to drive change.

### Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/topics/Pages/postsecondary-education.aspx#>  
206.709.3100

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, the foundation focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, the foundation seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

### College Keys Compact

[professionals.collegeboard.com/policy-advocacy/access/collegekeys](http://professionals.collegeboard.com/policy-advocacy/access/collegekeys)  
The CollegeKeys Compact™ is a call to action to Compact member school districts, colleges and universities, state education agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Our goal is to identify, share, and intensify ways to address the needs and challenges of increasing access and success for low-income students. ACCT is a member of the College Keys Compact.

### Ford Foundation

[www.fordfoundation.org](http://www.fordfoundation.org)  
212.573.5000

The Ford Foundation is a resource for innovative people and institutions worldwide. Its goals for more than half a century have been to: Strengthen democratic values; Reduce poverty and injustice; Promote international cooperation; and Advance human achievement. The Ford Foundation Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom Program includes education and scholarship strategies that emphasize outreach to underserved and marginalized groups.

### Jobs for the Future

[www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)  
617.728.4446

Jobs for the Future believes that all young people should have a quality high school and postsecondary education, and that all adults should have the skills needed to hold jobs that pay enough to support a family. As a nonprofit research, consulting, and advocacy organization, JFF works to strengthen our society by creating educational and economic opportunity for those who need it most.

### League for Innovation in the Community College

[www.league.org/](http://www.league.org/)  
480.705.8200

The League is an international organization dedicated to catalyzing the community college movement. The League hosts conferences and institutes, develops Web resources, conducts research, produces publications, provides services, and leads projects and initiatives with our member colleges, corporate partners, and other agencies in our continuing efforts to make a positive difference for students and communities.

### Lumina Foundation

[www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org)  
800.834.5756

The mission of Lumina Foundation for Education is to expand access to postsecondary education in the United States. The Foundation seeks to identify and promote practices leading to improvement in the rates of entry and success in education beyond high school, particularly for students of low income or other underrepresented backgrounds. It likewise seeks improvement in opportunities for adult learners. The Foundation carries out the mission through funding and conducting research; communicating ideas through reports, conferences and other means; and making grants to educational institutions and other nonprofits for innovative programs. It also contributes limited resources to support selected community and other charitable organizations.

### Making Opportunity Affordable Initiative

[www.makingopportunityaffordable.org/](http://www.makingopportunityaffordable.org/)  
617.728.4446

Making Opportunity Affordable is a multi-year initiative focused on increasing productivity within U.S. higher education, particularly at two- and four-year public colleges and universities. The aim is to use dollars invested by students, parents and taxpayers to graduate more students. The initiative, supported by Lumina Foundation for Education and the Wal-Mart Foundation, relies on partner organizations working within various states to develop, promote and implement policies and practices that will help achieve this goal.



[www.acct.org](http://www.acct.org)

1233 20th Street NW, Suite 301 • Washington, D.C. 20036  
Tel: 202.775.4667 • Fax: 202.223.1297 • [acctinfo@acct.org](mailto:acctinfo@acct.org)