

COMMENTARY

Lessons From a 2-Year-College 'Master Class'

By PAT STANLEY

Convene a group of community-college leaders for a day, and you're bound to come away with a multitude of good ideas. At a series of four "Issues That Matter" meetings held by the Education Department's Office of Vocational and Adult Education over the last academic year, nearly 80 college leaders gathered to discuss issues urgent to community colleges. All are familiar — the need to create career pathways, improve articulation and developmental education, and serve adults with low literacy levels. These leaders were unafraid to push the envelope, highly aware of the new realities — demographic, technological, and economic — that demand change in the way we educate people for work and for life.

The discussions were rich, and replete with good ideas. Some were practical and straightforward and could be adopted tomorrow by virtually any college. Others were more complicated and long range, but all inspired those of us seeking to streamline the community-college journey for students and adapt to the changing world. As Kathryn E. Jeffery, president of Sacramento City College, summed up the discussions: "I feel like I've been in a master class."

In this article, I share some of the promising practices discussed in our "master class." Most of the ideas deal with multiple issues: student success, college finances, and community and industry needs. Although these practices range widely, they have several important points in common. They all:

- Demonstrate a willingness to take risks and try something new.
- Look beyond conventional sources of income and partners, as well as conventional instructional methods and program structure.
- Seek to adapt to change.
- Derive from a desire to better serve their communities and students, as well as to enlarge and enhance their institutions and maintain financial stability.

Specifically, community-college leaders offered the following examples of approaches that have been successful for them:

Make connections everywhere. College leaders strongly emphasized the need to exploit any and all connections that can be helpful to students, the college, and the community.

This means looking beyond the "usual suspects" for partners and adopting new approaches.

For example, Brunswick Community College, in Supply, N.C., works with local churches to get the word out about opportunities for students. One church holds a college fair, where college staff members talk about admissions and financial aid. Its reach goes beyond the church community: One fair at this 400-member church attracted 1,000 participants. Austin Community College, in Texas, sends direct mail to parents of students in sixth grade or above to let them know about the college's dual-enrollment program with local high schools. Pima Community College, in Tucson, Ariz., and Gateway Technical College, in Kenosha, Wis., use distance learning to work with industries and associations across state lines to provide training and certification. Several college presidents are hoping to build relationships with their local Job Corps center, to take advantage of the U.S. Department of Labor's effort to push Job Corps participants further along the job-training path.

Some colleges take a "high touch" approach. At Coastline Community College, in Fountain Valley, Calif., President Ding-Jo Currie instituted a college phone bank to track students who had dropped out or failed to register. College staff members volunteer to make the calls to remind students to register or find out why they have left. The volunteers enjoy the contact with students; the college gets information; and the students, says Ms. Currie, are "hungry for connection," adding, "If they detach, they drop out. This simple gesture makes a big difference."

Davidson County Community College, in Lexington, N.C., holds family orientations on Saturdays, and adult students bring their children. The kids get T-shirts that say "My Mom Goes to Davidson Community College." This enables the children to understand what their parents are doing when they are away in the evenings, and it exposes them to the college environment at an early age.

Many colleges are forging new connections at program and course levels as well. Some combine developmental reading and writing into a single course to enable students to move ahead faster. Some link developmental courses with career courses, with the same goal. And others have instituted courses co-taught by developmental and academic faculty.

Use data aggressively — and share it. Several presidents found that "hard numbers" could be persuasive with many audiences: their own faculty, legislators, high-school administrators, and others. For example, some colleges offer their placement tests to secondary-school students and share the data with schools, demonstrating how ready — or not — students are for college. Seeing actual numbers can help overcome faculty resistance to learning about gaps in student readiness.

Kirkwood Community College, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, administers the COMPASS test, on a voluntary basis, to high-school sophomores and juniors, and shares test results with the high schools, allowing time for midcourse corrections before students graduate.

Kirkwood also tracks students who make the transition to four-year institutions and shares those data with high schools. Since high-school teachers are generally not happy to learn that their students are unprepared, coupling information about student success with the COMPASS scores makes school staff members more receptive to acting on the test data. At Peninsula College, in Port Angeles, Wash., President Thomas A. Keegan shares demographic data with his faculty and staff members so they understand the literacy levels in the community and the importance of adult education. That has led to a new focus on adult learners at the college, a focus, according to Mr. Keegan, that "came from the numbers."

Rethink the old terminology. Names are important, and they sometimes bear rethinking. Some college leaders felt that traditional terminology could be an impediment to their efforts to change. They worried, for example, that the term "developmental education" (also known as remedial education) implied deficits and low standards, and could be detrimental to both students and the college. A strong consensus emerged at one meeting for substituting the term "transitional studies" for developmental education. The participants found "transitional studies," with its connotation of progress, to be more truly reflective of the aims of developmental education. At the program level, Hennepin Technical College, in Brooklyn Park, Minn., found that when its dwindling automated-packaging program was renamed "automation robotics engineering technology," enrollment skyrocketed.

Offer incentives to enroll. Concerned about the prevalent stereotype of community colleges as "last chance" institutions, the Community College for Beaver County, in Monaca, Penn., offers full scholarships to high-school graduates in the top 10 percent of their class. Joe Forrester, president, believes that that sends a clear message about the academic quality of the college's programs. Indian Hills Community College, in Ottumwa, Iowa, offers scholarships to high-school valedictorians and salutatorians. For both colleges, these scholarships are not just incentives for students, they also are a powerful demonstration of quality that helps attract other students.

Health care is a growth industry in the area of Wor-Wic Community College, in Salisbury, Md., but completion rates for students in the nursing program were low. Many nursing students were single parents who needed to keep their jobs to obtain child care and health insurance. Too many found it too difficult to get through the program. President Murray K. Hoy convened a committee of health-care providers, local officials, and representatives of the largest local hospital to focus on the issue. They developed a plan to provide \$12,000 over three years to any nursing students who committed to work at the hospital when they completed the program. Students were also able to get child care and buy health insurance at the employee rate while in school. These incentives have contributed to a 66-percent increase in the nursing program over the past five years.

Streamline. College leaders understand the pressures facing businesses that need trained employees and students to move quickly into jobs or advanced education. Many are looking at nearly every aspect of their colleges to see how they can streamline their procedures to be more responsive to these needs. Pima Community College, in Tucson,

Ariz., does a considerable amount of work with major corporations, including Microsoft, Boeing, and Comcast, among others. Jana B. Kooi, president of its downtown campus, quickly realized that a fast curriculum-approval process was needed to be able to respond to the training demands of these companies. As she points out, "Microsoft changes its curriculum every week. The only way to stay current is to get a fast turnaround time." The college instituted a 48-hour approval process for curricula for industry training; the traditional curriculum-approval process takes three to six months. "You can't," she says, "keep industry waiting."

At Nassau Community College, in Garden City, N.Y., President Sean A. Fanelli has "made a deal" with local high schools: When high-school students demonstrate a need for remediation before entering college, the high schools agree to provide those courses. In return, Nassau offers credit courses in the high schools, at one-third of its regular tuition cost. Students can gain college credit quickly, and the college can enroll more students prepared to do college-level work.

Coastline, the California college, put its registration process online. Baton Rouge Community College conducted a work-flow analysis of its enrollment, payment, and registration processes, with the goal of minimizing the number of times students must come to campus to handle administrative details.

I know that our "master class," rich in ideas as it was, is just a sample of the innovations proliferating in the community-college world. (For more information about this project and others, visit <http://www.ed.gov/communitycollege>.) These practices are transforming education in their communities, and we need more of them. Besides keeping all this creativity bubbling, however, we must continue to spread the word about these good ideas, preserve the momentum for change, and share, as one college president put it, "the best with the best."

Pat Stanley, a former president of Frederick Community College (Md.), is deputy assistant secretary for community colleges in the U.S. Education Department's Office of Adult and Vocational Education. The "Issues that Matter" meetings are among many community-college projects sponsored by that office, which is directed by Assistant Secretary Troy R. Justesen.