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# Unite for Success: Creating Business and Community College Partnerships for Economic Development

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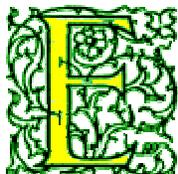


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# **Unite for Success: Creating Business and Community College Partnerships for Economic Development**

(White Paper Commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce)

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## **Executive Summary**

While community colleges have historically been a source of training for many people, the latest trend is a drift from their vocational focus to one of a more scholarly focus: transfer to four-year institutions. At the same time, business and industry are demanding more highly-trained workers as many employment opportunities remain open due to a lack of appropriately trained individuals. This white paper posits a confluence of the missions and needs of community colleges and local businesses and describes scenarios where long-term united efforts will assist local residents to engage the jobs and opportunities in Los Angeles and to strengthen the middle class structure of the city. Further, the paper argues that a united posture between community colleges and community businesses make logical, financial, and altruistic sense.

## **Introduction**

Community colleges have a long and illustrious history of training and educating students for direct entry to the workforce. Often referred to as vocational or occupational education, this distinctive feature of the mission of California two-year colleges has sometimes been lost among the swirling debate of transfer rates, non-credit instruction, and remedial classes. However, the community college often offers the only viable solution to short-term education capable of lifting people into the middle classes through entry to occupations with wages above the minimum mandated by law and capable of providing personal prestige and satisfaction. The use of the word "community" in the nomenclature for two-year colleges (previously referred to as 'junior colleges') is purposeful. To earn the title of "community" college, these institutions are charged with the order of providing education and related services that will enhance the residents of the community.

Like other metropolitan cities, Los Angeles is witnessing the development of a New Economy shifting quickly from service to technology and information. The movement from an emphasis on service, which includes many unskilled positions, to one of technology, which requires significant levels of training, contributes to a polarization of workers and class structures. The New Economy provides opportunity for those in the upper echelons of the workforce but does little to nothing for those workers who occupy positions in the lowest

paying positions. Thus the gains of some can be interpreted as a loss for others - the result being a widening of the socioeconomic chasm and a shrinking of the middle working class. The polarization is most strongly felt by the immigrant workers who remain shackled to the lowest paid positions. This white paper seeks to examine the impact of such change in light of developing community-based strategies that may reduce or even reverse the widening chasm of socioeconomic differences. Further, this paper posits that only through mutually beneficial partnerships with community businesses can the mission of the local community college be met while at the same time the employment needs of the community businesses will be better satisfied.

### **Lessons from (Your Father's) Oldsmobile**

General Motors recently released a surprising announcement that America's oldest automaker - Oldsmobile - would cease operations. Despite an aggressive marketing plan designed to promote the automobile previously best known for its sturdiness and dependability, to a younger upscale audience, the "not your father's Oldsmobile" campaign backfired. The stark reality was that Olds management ignored its longtime successful target audience and transformed itself to a product perceived as irrelevant, misdirected, or both. Community colleges may have embarked on a path similarly misdirected and shortsighted. The community colleges are in the midst of downplaying their historic vocational mission preferring to emphasize their more scholarly mission: transfer. Like the Oldsmobile that tried to capture a "new" audience but only succeeded in alienating its reliable and trusted customers, community colleges must not embrace their transfer mission only to overlook their role as quality providers of vocational training. Further, businesses should take a second look at the mission of community colleges as providers of services tailored for the community and take advantage of relationships that can be mutually beneficial.

### **The New Faces of Vocational Training**

Definitions of vocational training have evolved. Today, car mechanics must be trained as highly specialized technicians, requiring training in electronics, computer technology, and vehicle systems analysis. Certified nursing assistants and other health care providers must be equipped and ready to work in stressful conditions and receive training grounded in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, biology, and medicine. Even the once low-wrung welding curriculum has undergone a transformation. Welding students now receive advanced instruction in science, technology, and applications including consumable and non-consumable electrode welding and cutting, math, blueprint reading, metallurgy, welding inspection, and destructive and non-destructive testing. Community colleges struggle to keep on the "cutting edge" so that students emerge from courses and degree programs as "industry-ready." Further, once educated, workers in these areas must continue to evolve and develop as the tides of technological change erode the basis of earlier training.

### **The Coexistence of Unemployment and "Help Wanted"**

Although seemingly paradoxical, unemployment looms in Los Angeles alongside employers who cannot find qualified and trained workers. The rapid growth of high tech jobs and

information-based industry juxtapositioned with the effect of waves of newly arriving immigrants in search of refuge and opportunity serve only to heighten this disparity. Although there are no magic elixirs for the problems of unemployment, underemployment, or the lack of qualified workers, the establishment of stable, long-term partnerships between industry and community colleges may be highly effective and mutually beneficial. It is vital to acknowledge the role of funding in the activities of partnerships. Too often excellent projects falter after the initial ardor and memories of the event that triggered the partnership fade.

### **A Proposed Plan of Action**

I propose that community colleges hold an important key to the advancement of industry in the Los Angeles area and that local industry can be instrumental in establishing policies and programs that will advance the lives of many Angelinos. In this paper, I propose a basic three-step process to establish and maintain partnerships that can assist Los Angeles workers to attain employment and middle-class lives as well as provide trained workers in Los Angeles industries.

Step One- Introductions and Establishments. Unlike earlier times, most people do not know their neighbors. Similarly, most businesses operate without knowledge of what occurs or of the capabilities of the local community college. Of course, a similar unawareness exists for community colleges with respect to local businesses. For this reason, step one requires a summit where introductions between important members of the community can take place. For this to happen, I posit the need for a board or oversight committee to perform a needs assessment of the community that will explore and identify existing vocational programs and the corresponding areas currently in need of workers in Los Angeles. I entreat the committee to not narrow itself to jobs at the "high end" of training but to be open to those community needs that can be filled with community residents with limited or emerging English proficiency.

Step Two - Building the Infrastructure. Industries expend a large amount of capital advertising for open positions and in providing "on the job" training. For example, a typical help wanted ad (3" x 4") posted by a business appearing both in the regular issue of the Los Angeles Times as well as on the Internet for only 4 days will cost approximately \$2,300. In addition, the cost of training employees cannot easily be estimated because of the complexity and individuality of each instance. However, total expenditures must include the costs of materials, photocopying, salary and opportunity costs of the trainer (including preparation), and time trainees and trainers are away from their work. Finally "on the job" training is limited to short-term activities and is rarely used (or useful) in large-scale efforts to train individuals for an entirely new career or direction.

Outsourcing some of the training to the community colleges requires the construction of infrastructure answers to the following questions:

What are the skills and capabilities of the community college instructional staff? If present staffing does not meet the needs of the industry, are appropriately trained individuals

available? Can they be hired?

What equipment is available for training? If not appropriate, what are the costs of purchase or rent? Or can equipment be loaned by the industry to the college for training purposes?

How will students/employees be identified? What process will be used to evaluate the student/employees as training progresses? What processes must be in place to terminate students who are not progressing at the expected and appropriate pace.

Where will training take place? If suitable surroundings and equipment are available at the industry-site, can the class be conducted in-house?

How will the program be funded both short-term and long-term?

Step Three~Develop Ongoing Concrete Plans. Although there can be various policies or alternative structures, I posit the sponsorship network as a triad of possibilities. In the first scenario, the employer elects to pay up front all tuition and education costs for pre-approved students. The student is guaranteed a job upon successful completion of the program and repays the employer through automatic payroll deductions over an agreed-upon period. Alternatively, the partnership network may seek foundation or government grants to recover these costs. The second scenario follows a more internship model that presumes that the employer will hire the learner on a part-time basis while he or she is attending classes. Upon successful completion, the learner receives promotion to full-time status and repays the costs as in option one. Again, the possibility of supporting workstudy funds or other grants offers an alternative. The third scenario utilizes either option one or two, with the added enhancement that the employer agrees to cancel the debt when the employee completes two years of service with the company.

Regardless of the scenario, the result is constant. The student/employee emerges with enhanced skills and the industry hires a better-trained worker.

### **Long Term Relationships: Continuing the Partnership**

The work of the coalition of business, education, and community described above should not end once the worker is initially trained and placed. Rapidly evolving technologies and ever-changing marketing, production, service, and distribution schemes will create ongoing needs for retraining and updating of job skills. The community colleges also need to recognize the need for partnership and to give the attention and prestige to vocational programs that their original missions once accorded.

Vocational education programs in the community provide robust opportunities for partnership. The High Performing Workforce will only remain so through effective links to enhancing and improving skills. Innovative programs such as contract education and extension classes located in the community offer excellent opportunities for skills acquisition and growth. Local communities of faith, community-based organizations, government agencies, as well as business and industry can and should act together to recognize, design

and implement the structures needed to fuel growth in the essential middle class strata of our local economy.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Los Angeles is unique. Amid the Hollywood glitter, the wealth of Beverly Hills, and the excitement of life in the movie capital of the world exists many people living in poverty and/or working at dead-end jobs. Los Angeles's business and community organizations have employment opportunities that can provide Angelinos the chance to live a better life in the sunshine state. At the same time, California is home to the largest community college network in the country and the city of Los Angeles has the nation's largest community college district. College has traditionally been viewed as an individual choice - something one does when ready. However, college can also be a business choice~ and maybe a wise one.

Indeed, economic vitality requires careful balance. A shift in any direction may have a damaging effect. On the other hand, a well-prepared workforce built upon the proactive engagement of community, educational and business partnerships can lead the way for a bright future of economic development in an environment of rich cultural diversity and cooperative endeavor.

In short, community colleges must embrace and return to their most basic function: the education of the adults in the community. The driving force is that adults need jobs and industry needs workers. It seems a logical conclusion that the local community colleges be charged with the training of the community's adults to enable and empower them to work in the industries of their neighborhoods. Doesn't it make sense to unite for success?

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