

Business Leaders See Community Colleges as Linchpin of Competitiveness

By JOHN PULLEY

WASHINGTON — Maintaining the country's economic competitiveness in a time of globalization will require renewed collaboration between community colleges and the business community.

That was the conclusion drawn last week by members of Congress, business executives and community college leaders who took part in a Capitol Hill forum focused on two-year colleges' untapped potential for advancing U.S. competitiveness. The program was convened by the Business Roundtable, an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. companies with combined annual revenues of \$4.5 trillion.

During most of the last century, rapid gains in educational attainment made the United States' workforce the envy of the world. But those gains have stalled during the transition to a knowledge-based economy requiring some postsecondary education for most new jobs. Supplying knowledge workers in sufficient numbers to meet market demand is a responsibility that will largely fall to community colleges, forum participants said.

"We need to look at them [community colleges] as critical to the country's competitiveness in the 21st Century," said Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga.

Compounding the challenge of creating a highly-trained workforce are profound demographic shifts, including an influx of immigrants whose access to college and rates of educational attainment are lower than that of

the larger population.

Edmund Kelly, chief executive officer Boston-based Liberty Mutual Group, bemoaned the changing nature of institutions, such as Boston College, that in past decades served as vehicles for moving immigrants into the middle class. In the intervening years, BC, New York University and other former gateway colleges have attained elite status — with tuitions to match — placing them out of reach for large segments of the population.

"Community colleges have to fill that gap," Kelly said. "We are not getting people who can read and write... we really need people with technical skills. If the education system isn't delivering that, we will never be competitive."

Forum participants observed that numerous factors hamper collaboration and understanding between community colleges and businesses, among them disjointed government programs, onerous federal reporting requirements and the lack of a shared language. Educators said they need better economic data to tailor programs to the needs of businesses, whose leaders expressed the desire for less generic education and more programs aimed at particular needs.

To that end, the Public Service Enterprise Group, a gas and electric utility company that serves three-quarters of New Jersey households, worked with the state's community colleges to design a curriculum to meet the company's need for technical workers. The company now hires about 80 percent of students who complete the program.

DIFFERENT MEASURES

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The program has succeeded, said Chief Executive Officer Ralph Izzo, because the company and its community college partners devoted most of a year to getting the details right, specifying classes, books, laboratory requirements and other course components required to impart desired technical skills.

Community college leaders, meanwhile, called on business leaders and government officials to help them understand national and local economic trends that inform the programs those institutions offer.

"We have trouble figuring out where national trends are going," said Jim Jacobs, president-elect of Macomb Community College, in Michigan. "Linkage between businesses and community colleges needs to be strengthened."

Conversely, LaGuardia Community College, in the Queens section of New York City, would benefit from "much more localized business information," said Gail Mellow, its president. Economic conditions on 134th Street aren't the same as those on 34th Street, she noted.

"I don't have on-the-ground information about what company just moved out," she said.

The liveliest conversation of

the forum centered on government reporting requirements that were characterized as overly burdensome by some participants and wide off the mark by others.

The federal government's National Center for Education Statistics, for example, tracks the progress of full-time, first-time students, a cohort that constitutes only 17 percent of students at LaGuardia, Mellow said. She suggested that more meaningful metrics might assess other outcomes, such as the percentage of community college students whose access to education leads to jobs with health-care benefits, or the impact of community colleges on workforce development.

"We don't even have a standard for measuring that," Mellow said. "You measure me as if I were Princeton."

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Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., said federal lawmakers' perspective on postsecondary education is skewed because "higher education on Capitol Hill is dominated by [four-year] colleges." Whereas the mission of those

institutions is the creation of new knowledge, Mikulski noted, community colleges are called upon to put that knowledge into practice by producing job-ready graduates.

Ding-Jo H. Currie, president of Coastline Community College, in California, suggested that degrees and certificates attesting to program completion are of less value to businesses than a guarantee that students have attained the skills that employers actually need.

"I haven't heard one business say 'Give me a graduate,' said Currie, who was among the forum participants who called for meaningful measures of community college success. "Are we asking the right questions to get the right measures?"

Some forum participants acknowledged first-hand knowledge of community colleges. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., has a son who is enrolled at a two-year institution. And William Green, chairman and chief executive officer of Accenture, a management consulting firm, began his own postsecondary education at a community college.

The Business Roundtable has called on Congress to create a bipartisan National Commission on Workforce Competitiveness. As conceived, the commission's charge would be to overhaul disparate worker-training programs into a comprehensive strategy for meeting the country's surging demand for skilled workers.

"At the end of the day," said Green, "the companies with the best people win." ▲

CORRECTION

A story appearing in the May 5, 2008 edition of *Community College Week* incorrectly reported the status of bill regulating private lenders of student loans. The measure has been approved by a Senate committee but has not been approved by the full Senate. *Community College Week* regrets the error.

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