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The community college-employer connection

August 4, 2017

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. For well over a century, Community colleges across America have offered educational and training opportunities to millions of people from all walks of life. My guest on the show today says that amid concerns about the skills gap in America, building the community college and employer relationship matters more than ever. Elizabeth Mann is a fellow in the Brown Center on Education Policy here at Brookings, and an expert on the politics of education and how federal state relationship shape education policy. She's the author of a new toolkit on connecting community colleges with employers and successful partnerships. Stay tuned during the interview for another installment of Metro Lens featuring Scott Allard's discussion of poverty in the suburbs. You can get the latest show information by following the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts. And now on with the interview. Elizabeth welcome to the Brookings cafeteria.

MANN: Thanks very much.

DEWS: All right we're talking community colleges. I'd like to start with an overview of what community colleges in America are. For example, how many are there across this country?

MANN: Sure. So as of 2017 there are just over a thousand community colleges so 1,108 is the number we get from the American Association for community colleges.

DEWS: Now these are in rural places, they're in urban places and we generally think of them as two year programs of study.

MANN: Exactly. So these are two year institutions they offer associate's degrees. They also offer certificates, various training programs, and vocational education.

DEWS: So what kind of students attend them, I mean they serve a different kind of community than your traditional four-year college.

MANN: Students who attend community colleges are pretty diverse group. And so one thing that's important to know, and this is according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, data from 2000 to 2006 indicated that 44 percent of low income students attend community colleges as the first college after high school. And so one thing I think that that's pointing to is that these institutions are serving students from low income backgrounds. That makes sense when you think about the cost of community colleges compared to public four year institutions. So for example according to the American Association for community colleges in the 2016-17 school year, the average annual tuition and fees at two-year public community colleges was $3,520. Compare that to average annual tuition and fees for four year public colleges, where an in-state tuition was $9,650. So community colleges cost less than half right your public in-state tuition.

DEWS: So a lot of students can go to community colleges and they can just stop with a two-year associate's degree, they can get job training, although some of them are still using community colleges a pipeline into a four-year college. Are a lot of people still taking that route into the four-year college?

MANN: Yes. So and again this is data from the Community College Research Center at Columbia, a lot of students when they start at community colleges indicate a

desire to transfer to a four-year institution and to finish out a four-year institution. So for example, 81 percent of community college students indicated a desire to earn a B.A. at a four-year college. However, the percent of students who actually go on to then transfer and earn a degree at a four-year college is a lot smaller than that percent who initially indicated a desire to do so. So for example 14 percent of community college students earn a B.A. in six years. So you know the share of students who are interested in going on, and then those who actually successfully complete a B.A. after a two-year institution is smaller.

DEWS: How are community colleges of today different than say a generation or two ago in terms of reputation and quality. Know here that Darrell West the VP and director of governance studies, he called Community Colleges America's forgotten institutions. So they've evolved a lot over the last couple of generations. Can you address that briefly?

MANN: Sure. And I think what I can speak to is you know less changes in their quality and actually what I think is really important is this consistently important role that they play in the American economy and in our education system. So you know community colleges were initially established to provide training for students and they began you know they grew out of these vocational programs and technical programs in high schools. And I think today community colleges actually are poised to continue playing this role of providing job training to a lot of students across the country. So I think it's not so much that the quality has changed and more that the prestige of these institutions is you know perceived as lower than something like an ivy or really you know top tier four-year institutions that are public as well. And so I think part of the problem is not necessarily in

the quality, but this reputational problem you know I think kind of exacerbates attracting you know more funding and things like that in these institutions.

DEWS: Well I think that's a great segue into the main point of this conversation which is to discuss this new toolkit that you've put together, it's just been published by Brookings by the Brown Center on Education Policy. It's called "Connecting Community Colleges with Employers, a Toolkit for Building Successful Partnerships." And you are speaking to that economic function of community colleges. And one of the first lines of the toolkit of the discussion is "amid persistent concerns about the well-documented skills gap, community colleges have the potential to provide low cost, high quality education and training to students." So let's start with the skills gap. What is this "skills gap" that community colleges are kind of position to help address?

MANN: Right. So the skills gap is at the most basic level this turn that there are a lot of jobs that remain unfilled because there are not workers who are properly trained to fill those jobs. And so this is a large concern, and you hear this repeatedly from industry leaders that there are employers who need people to fill their positions and they cannot find individuals with the proper training to fill those positions. So obviously this is a problem when you think kind of more broadly about economic competition and about you know economic growth in the U.S. overall, and this is also you know something that then has led a lot of people to think about OK well what needs to happen on both the industry and the education side in order to fill that gap.

DEWS: So how would you characterize the difference between the relationship of community colleges and industries in their local areas versus four year institutions and employers?

MANN: I think that's a really good question, and how I think about that is kind of four-year institutions that are preparing students that may graduate with for example a psychology degree, you know those kinds of liberal arts degrees, that kind of training I think is broadly seen as preparing students to enter a variety of different fields. So the education that you're getting isn't necessarily specific to one sector, so you're not necessarily being trained to go into healthcare or to work in I.T., you're being trained with skills that I think the idea is provide a foundation for you then to go explore any number of different directions to your institutions you know a lot of these specific certificates and training programs are meant to produce, you know when you graduate the idea is that you can get a job specifically in that field and in that industry that you trained in. So this is where you know if these skills that you're getting are not actually aligned to the field that you're trained for, that's a bigger problem right because your degree isn't necessarily seen as kind of this broad qualification or license that might be applicable in a number of areas. It's supposed to put you directly into one field.

DEWS: Well you mentioned health care, you mentioned I.T., what kinds of jobs specifically are we talking about that community colleges today are positioning themselves or are well positioned to help train students for?

MANN: Yeah, so again a good question and my answer in this is going to perhaps be unsatisfyingly vague and so one thing that I learned in the process of writing this toolkit is that the specific kinds of jobs that community colleges should be training their students for, if the system is working properly those jobs should be aligned to the specific labor market in that area where students are graduating and so that might look really different depending on you know what part of the country, what part of a state you're in. So

generally speaking you know I mentioned health care and I mentioned I.T., these are some of the fields that are you know really booming where there is a lot of demand for skilled workers. And I think you know certainly for a lot of colleges those are going to be applicable fields. But you know there are also other programs, I'm thinking about some of the case studies that I read. There is a community college in Washington State that realized that there is a developing winemaking industry you know, and so one of the training programs that they invested in was you know preparing people to then work in this local winemaking industry working in these vineyards. Obviously I'm not recommending that all community colleges now adopt winemaking programs but that's kind of one example of how you know I think the best answer for, "what should students be trained for?" They should be specifically trained for you know in programs that are designed with these local labor market needs in mind.

DEWS: Right, let's focus on the toolkit itself. What exactly is a toolkit? What have you created here?

MANN: So this toolkit is designed with a pretty specific goal in mind. We were pretty aware of this growing conversation about the skills gap and thinking about you know the role that community colleges can play in helping to fill this "skills gap" you know and what's really important to me is thinking about community college's mission and how well-positioned they are to serve students from lower income backgrounds. And so the question driving this for me was, "what can we do that might be helpful to community college leaders as they work towards, you know, both filling the skills gap and also aligning their programs with local employers?" So with that in mind the goal of this toolkit is a little bit different from your typical report, and so you know we're not presenting a lot

of terms of data analysis or things like that but rather what we're trying to do is distill advice from existing literature, from case studies that have been written, from interviews that I conducted with Community College Leaders, with industry leaders, with intermediaries who try to work in between the two. And what we wanted to do was kind of distill some nuggets of wisdom about what do productive relationships between colleges and industry is look like, and we wanted to go a bit beyond just a recommendation that colleges develop these relationships. Our goal here was to say you know why exactly what parts of these relationships are important, what are specific strategies you can implement to develop and build and maintain these relationships, and we wanted to make those recommendations based on advice from practitioners from people who know this best you know who are in the field and who are actually innovating and implementing some of these strategies.

DEWS: You talked about productive relationships, is there anything that kind of stands as a barrier to having your productive relationship between an educational institution on the one hand and private sector businesses on the other hand, they have maybe different motivations.

MANN: Absolutely. And I think it's really important upfront to acknowledge those different motivations. And in fact in a lot of the literature that I read and a lot of the conversations that I had you know people are very frank that look businesses are motivated you know by profit. Right? That circle, community colleges have a different mission. They have a really broad educational mission. They often have an academic side as well as vocational side. There's also a difference in pace and I saw this described about a lot of different programs as a barrier, you know that needs to be overcome.

Businesses might make decisions a lot faster than a community college who might need to go to an advisory board you know they have a lot of different folks a lot of different stakeholders that they have to be responsible to. And so one thing that I learned through my conversations and through reading a lot of this literature is that it's really important for leaders on both sides to kind of acknowledge those differences and then you know the building block of these relationships are what some researchers refer to as these shared norms and shared missions. And so although businesses you know have a profit motive and community colleges have this really broad educational mandate. They do have a really important mutual interest. Colleges want to educate their students so that when they graduate from a two-year institution or with a certificate or from a training program, they're going to be successful they're going to find a job that's a good fit for them. And then in turn again with the skills gap in mind, employers want employees who are ready who are trained. Right. And so that's an obvious and really important and powerful I think source of mutual interest that it's important both for businesses and colleges up front to recognize you know how they might approach this differently. But if they can identify what they both want I think that that's really a key starting point for building these relationships.

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DEWS: Let's take a quick break to hear from Scott Allard with another edition of Metro Lens.

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ALLARD: I'm Scott Allard. a nonresident senior fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, and a professor at the Evans School of Public Policy

and Governance at the University of Washington. Ten years ago, well before the Great Recession hit, I interviewed a food pantry director about rising demand in her community. The pantry had just opened a larger facility to meet rising need, as the number of families seeking food assistance had more than doubled in the past couple years. People are coming from all over to receive help, the director noted as we toured the facility, many shelves were empty. As fast as donations came in, food would go right out to the families. By all indications this was a community experiencing economic crisis and the economic crisis of the Great Recession was still to come. Now this description may conjure up images of the inner cities that President Trump has railed against. Or it may evoke the rural poverty that America has battled for decades. But this food pantry wasn't in either the city or the country, it was in the suburbs. We may be surprised. Suburbs are places that the American imagination associates more with the comfortable lives represented in "The Brady Bunch" or "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" than with food pantries and rising poverty. After all, that's what 50 years of news coverage, popular culture, and political discourse have directed us to believe. In fact, that's what social policy researchers like myself believed for a long time. But there is a new reality in suburbia today. America's suburbs are suffering a crisis of poverty. Research from the Metropolitan Policy Program has begun to draw attention to this crisis over the past several years. But all too often, philanthropists, politicians, researchers, and journalists fail to recognize the depth and complexity of poverty problems in the suburbs, and in metropolitan areas overall. My new book, "Places in Need," builds upon my work for the Metropolitan Policy Program to examine how poverty in suburbs now rivals levels that have been an all too familiar reality for cities and rural communities. Since 1990, the number of people living in poverty has

doubled in suburbs, increasing at almost three times the rate of population growth. In fact, there are actually more poor people today living in suburbs than in cities. Poverty has been present in most suburban communities for more than 30 years. But we seem to have reached a tipping point where there is a sudden awareness of suburban poverty problems. While traveling the country, researching my book "Places in Need," I found this trend is not limited to just older innering suburbs or handful of communities. It's happening across the suburban landscape of the country from the sprawl around Los Angeles to the bedroom communities of Chicago to the Maryland and Virginia counties that border Washington D.C. Demographic and labor market changes, above all the disappearance of good paying low skilled jobs, have turned the crabgrass frontier into the next frontier of American poverty. And poverty problems in suburbs as in cities and rural areas are now a temporary or short term reality. Despite the long running economic recovery, more than 17 million suburban residents face impossible choices between providing food for the table, paying for childcare, making rent or the mortgage, staying current on bills, and keeping the car running. And many million urban and rural residents face the same dilemmas. Brookings researchers and I are constantly asked; "what will it take to get suburbs, or any community for that matter, out of poverty?" From my conversations with people living and working in these communities, one point became very clear; inaccurate impressions of place and poverty matter immensely to how well we help or don't help those in need. When we conceive of poverty as being just an urban or rural phenomenon we implicitly see it as a problem for others living in other places. People who are often thought to be undeserving. These perceptions undermine support for safety net programs at the local, state, and national levels, as well as dampen our private philanthropic efforts.

Instead, we need to recognize that poverty is a reality for every community in America. So our solutions must work for rural, urban, and suburban places alike. When we talk about ending poverty it can't just be about the people out there or over there, but also about the neighbors, families, and friends in all the places where we live. Doing so can go a long way toward building the political will needed to preserve federal funding for crucial anti-poverty programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. And it can also push for increasing rather than eliminating as a current White House budget does. Federal funds for social service programs that operate through community based nonprofits. Such organizations are the glue that holds communities together but far too many suburban, as well as urban and rural communities, lack the nonprofit infrastructure needed to help working poor families. Here, cities and suburbs need to work hand-in-hand as neighbors to scale up regional solutions that work for the needs of low income Americans. Ultimately, food bank shelves run empty and poverty grows when we act according to our perceived Geographic self-interest instead of the shared fate that is our reality. If we start to bring suburban poverty out from the shadows and into the sunlight of political and social action, Americans everywhere whether rural, urban, or suburban, will be better off.

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DEWS: You can listen to more Metro Lens pieces on our Soundcloud channel. And now back to my discussion with Elizabeth Mann.

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DEWS: The toolkit gets very granular even to the point of explaining how a community college can establish a liaison or a team of liaisons to interface between community college and local industry. How does that actually work? Are you saying that the community college should actually hire somebody to be the outreach coordinator for their students to the local businesses?

MANN: You're right we focus a lot on this liaison role or you know a navigator role whichever term you prefer. And the reason that we focus on this role, and this comes out of a lot of the conversations that I had with both Community College leaders and industry leaders, and we're not necessarily recommending that community colleges create a new role and hire a new position. We're very aware of the tight financial constraints that colleges are under. And in fact this is something I floated in a number of my conversations with Community College Leaders, and a couple of these folks did say you know we have programs like this that have offices where there are individuals who are responsible for helping businesses navigate our community college environments, and they found that to be really productive. And so what we recommend specifically is that it would be really useful for community colleges who don't already have something like this to appoint either an individual or a team of people who are really responsible for managing this relationship between let's say the college president's office and local industry leaders. And the reason why we think it's important to have this go between, there are a couple of reasons for this. So one is that community colleges can be really complicated bureaucracies. So something that you know I read and that we heard repeatedly is that from an industry leader's perspective who may not be familiar with the bureaucracy of higher education, and may not really understand how to navigate between the vocational side of a

community college and the academic side, but nonetheless as industry leader would really like to work with the college, a navigator can be someone or a liaison can be someone who basically answers a lot of these questions for this industry leader or makes it such that the industry leader doesn't have to spend, you know they don't get bounced around between phone calls between a lot of different offices. The liaison you know can meet with the potential business partner, get a sense of what they're looking for, you know take that list back to a dean or a college president work through that and then go back again to the business partner and say OK here are the people we think you need to talk to you know of the things that you would like us to do here the things that might be within the scope you know for us and here other things that we might not be able to do. So you know serving a couple of roles there so just kind of navigating the internal college environment so that the business partner doesn't have to, making sure the business partner is talking to the right people at the college given their interest, but also managing expectations you know so that six months into a project there are any kind of miscommunications about you know what exactly is going to happen in that program or that relationship.

DEWS: It seems like, that there is the possibility of in this relationship of the business side of the industry side kind of influence in the community college to adjust its curriculum, to create new programs, to kind of tailor the educational experience for what the business needs. A, is that a valid assumption, and B, is that a good outcome?

DEWS: So I think that that dynamic you pointed out can definitely be a source of friction. And again this is one of those points that I think you know from what I've learned it's very important for both sides to be really upfront about going in. And again this is

where establishing that shared mission and these shared norms can be really important because as you're pointing out a college has a much broader mission right than a business. And I don't think that an ideal is for our community colleges to be simply you know tailoring something exactly to the specifications of you know of a local industry leader. But at the same time I think that flexibility is important. From what I read and from the folks that I've talked to one thing that you know college leaders repeatedly reference and that other experts who study this repeatedly talk about is the importance of having frequent conversations and open lines of communication which I know sounds obvious or maybe sounds like not really kind of a hard hitting policy solution but at the same time if you feel comfortable you know either the industry partner or the community college you know constructively pushing back on one another and outlining exactly what you can do what you can't do and where you're willing to find some wiggle room. You know it's those conversations and that relationship building that I think allows people to get to that point where they can identify ways to make compromises around this kind of thing.

DEWS: We've talked about the liaison function that you have in your toolkit. What else can listeners of this podcast find in this toolkit?

MANN: Sure. So we talk about the liaison a lot again because I think that could be you know a really important step to assisting college presidents with their workforce initiatives and helping you know carve out some expertise. So one more point on kind of a recommendation to make what the law is and that I think could be valuable. And this is insights coming from a couple of different folks. And one way that these liaisons can be really helpful I think is if they develop expertise in the industries that they work in. And in these specific industry leaders that they work with. And the idea there is that it's important

for colleges to be responsive kind of to the local labor markets and so that might mean being aware of different trends you know predicting what types of employees may be you know in demand in the coming years and then letting that inform and thinking about how that should inform their training programs. Now developing that kind of industry specific expertise is not necessarily something that a college president is going to have time to do right when they have all these other demands on their plate, if that's something that a liaison or a navigator could do, and then kind of can help lay that groundwork and facilitate conversations based on that expertise between the industry leader and a college president or a Dean. I think that that could be really effective. So moving on from you know thinking specifically about this liaison another recommendation we make here that again came across loud and clear no matter who we talk to or you know no matter what case study I was reading. It's really important that leadership come from the top within community colleges on these workforce initiatives. And so the college president has a really important role to play here in you know sending a message both internally and externally that not only that they're prioritizing workforce development but that they want to hear from local industry leaders and want to work with them so that you know the programs that they're offering and the jobs that are available are actually aligned for their students. And so as you mentioned we got pretty granular in this and that's you know intentional because we want to as much as possible be you know providing examples of strategies that people could actually read this and take up and then think you know oh if that's feasible that's something I can actually go and do. And again I should say these are strategies. And we were again intentional about this where we didn't want to recommend something that then wouldn't necessarily require a college president to get a new grant

or do a lot of fundraising. So these are you know strategies that they could kind of implement in day to day interactions that might actually you know really have a big payoff for a relatively low startup cost. So one of these strategies I wanted to highlight and this comes from a conversation I had with Chris Lowery the senior vice president for workforce alignment at Indiana's Ivy Tech community college, and he explained that in his experience one helpful starting point for building these relationships between local business leaders and the college is to convene a roundtable of local leaders, and for the college to meet with them. So again this isn't fancy policymaking, this is just really practically thinking OK if we want to change some of our programs or make sure that our programs are aligned with what local industries need, we need to sit down with these folks and we need to think about what kind of employees are looking for what kind of training that requires. And so this point that something you know as straightforward as making sure that you are connecting with the people who employ a lot of folks in the community. You're sitting down and you're having a really structured conversation about what their goals are, about what your goals are as a college leader, and where you can find some mutual interest. You know that's something that he explained as being really powerful and both building these relationships, and then from there you know identifying ways that the college and the business leaders can work together. And I think this comes back to your point about you know there can definitely be friction where colleges have one mission and businesses have their own interests. But you know something like these local convening I think helps. Again you know kind of establish the sense of this is an actual partnership. You know this is not a business leader giving a community college instruction about their curriculum. This is about trying to identify what might a partnership look like

such that we're serving our students you know in the way that we want to be. And something else again and this is kind of another granular piece of advice that he recommended is you know if let's say there's a community college and they haven't necessarily had a lot of workforce partnerships before. You might not really know where to start. You might not necessarily have this power of convening to bring the local industry leaders to the table you might not even really know who to reach out to. And so one piece of advice here and I found this really insightful is that you know don't be afraid to ask for help you know so let's say the mayor or the local superintendent or a local large hospital or a large manufacturer let's say that there's you know identify the person in the community or you know the institution in the community who has a lot of really you know deep meaningful connections to the local business community and ask those people to help you bring together the groups of folks in the community who are actually going to be valuable partners for you, you know and who you can learn from about how to structure your programs. This advice sounds like it's overly practical it's meant to be you know it's meant to provide some pretty straightforward recommendations that may help college leaders if they think about what does a productive relationship actually look like and what are the very first steps to take in building those relationships.

DEWS: Well speaking of steps then what is your next step in terms of either this research or other research that you're doing in the Brown Center?

MANN: The next step you know thinking about this research. So obviously you know this toolkit is a set of recommendations it's based on interviews that I did, and existing case study in literature and things like that. So my next step is you know figuring out how useful these recommendations actually are. And so at this point you know we

don't have a formal evaluation component worked out. But what I'm hoping is that you know and I want to do some outreach to you know get some feedback on whether people implemented some of these recommendations and on how useful they are just to get a sense of you know is this something that we should build on. Is there a demand for information like this on you know some more of these practical steps. And if so you know what I'm curious about is what's the next level we could take this to kind of. Is there an area we wanted to focus on more specifically?

DEWS: All right. Well I want to thank you Elizabeth for sharing your time and expertise with us today.

MANN: Thanks so much for having me.

DEWS: You can learn more about Elizabeth Mann and her research including the toolkit for connecting community colleges with employers on our web site Brookings.edu.

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DEWS: Hey listeners, want to ask an expert a question? You can by sending an email to me at BCP@brookings.edu. If you attach an audio file, I'll play it on the air, and I'll get an expert to answer and include it in an upcoming episode. Thanks to all of you who have sent in questions already. And that does it for this edition of The Brookings Cafeteria, brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts. My thanks to audio engineer and producer Gastón Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. Vanessa Sauter is the producer. Bill Finan does the book interviews. Out interns are Sam Dart, Chynna Holmes, and Brian Harrington. Design and web support comes from Jessica Pavone, Eric Abalahin and Rebecca Viser. And

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