



Community College
Bridges to Opportunity

BRIDGES

Community College Bridges to Opportunity Initiative

Ford Foundation

Project Description

Through its varied array of programs, the U.S. community college is now a port of entry to higher education and skills upgrading for over five and a half million adults, nearly half of all students enrolled in U.S. public higher education. As an institution that serves diverse student groups and carries out multiple educational functions, the community college is one of the most adaptable and responsive American public institutions. The colleges are well-positioned to address the educational and economic challenges facing disadvantaged communities.

Despite their potential to serve the educational and economic needs of at-risk populations, community colleges face major challenges in effectively integrating the workforce and academic missions of the college. In too many cases, traditional academic programs remain structured to serve traditional college-age, full-time students, with fewer supports for the large numbers of older students, many of whom are poor and most of whom may need special academic support to succeed in college-level work. Workforce programs are often inaccessible to non-English speakers and those with limited educational attainment. In too many institutions, college academic/transfer and workforce/career programs operate under separate divisions that ignore the fact that most community college students are seeking both to advance in their careers and to earn a college degree. Focusing education solely on the immediate requirements of employment, limits students' long-term prospects for career advancement.

A key cause of these disconnects in practice is that the public policies by which community colleges are governed and funded are often out of touch with the needs of students served by these institutions. Even with the public interest goals that policymakers may aspire to achieve in some locations, many community colleges also tend to lack strong coalitions of support from key community and state-level stakeholders.

To respond to these needs, the Ford Foundation has initiated the Bridges to Opportunity Initiative with these objectives:

- Promote policy innovation which supports the integration of the multiple community college missions through selected engagement of policymakers, institutional practitioners, and multi-stakeholder coalitions of support from business, labor, and community groups, educational leaders and others;
- Research ways in which state and local policies can enhance community colleges' efforts to expand educational and economic opportunities for disadvantaged students; and,
- Develop models of effective institutional classroom and administrative practice for use by policymakers, college administrators, and advocacy coalitions.

The Foundation has approved multi-year grants to support state-level reform for developing new policy approaches in four states: Colorado, Kentucky, Ohio, and New Mexico. Proposals are being developed for work in two additional states – Louisiana and Washington. These grants will support policy innovations and strategies that emphasize: (1) building support from external constituencies; (2) securing buy-in from institutions and state officials; (3) enabling policy implementation through technical assistance and capacity-building activities; and (4) evaluating policy effectiveness in improving economic and academic outcomes for disadvantaged students.

An initiative consultant team, based at the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin, will manage the project for the Ford Foundation.

A project of the Community College Leadership Program • Funded by the Ford Foundation

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