

The Career Ladders Project for California Community Colleges
Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission
June 23, 2011

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective on the challenges facing community colleges and adult education providers in working with students who have literacy, numeracy and English language skills needs.

I am Linda Collins, Executive Director of the Career Ladders Project which fosters educational and career advancement for Californians through research, policy initiatives and strategic assistance to community colleges and their workforce partners. We develop and support evidence-based practices that can more effectively move youth and adults to—and help them succeed in—college and career.¹

Question: Chancellor Scott has often said that providing basic skills education is a core mission of the community college system, along with preparing students to enter the workforce or to transfer to a university. Is basic skills education an appropriate mission of the community college system? If so, how much should be the responsibility of the community college system?

Yes, basic skills instruction is, and should remain, a core mission of the California Community Colleges (CCC). In fact it couldn't be more important than it is right now. Prior to the recent cutbacks, more than 1.5 million Californians a year were basic skills students—being served either by the adult education or the community college system. Why? More than 20 percent of California's adults today lack a high school diploma or GED. Of the roughly 40 - 50% of entering community college students who are assessed, nearly 85% do not have college-level math and/or literacy skills; more than half of entering CSU students do not test at college-level. Meanwhile, a Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) analysis tells us that in ten years 75% of available jobs will require some postsecondary education. Even as baby boomers retire in increasingly large numbers, current rates of certificate and degree attainment—especially those of basic skills students—are far below what will be needed to meet the demands of California's employers for skilled workers.²

However, an important caveat is in order: the basic skills mission should not exist in isolation from the other two core CCC missions of career technical and transfer education. Rather, basic skills education should be re-conceptualized as a supportive and integral component of student success in reaching their educational and career goals. The historic failure to effectively link basic skills education to the academic and career technical courses of study that students need to succeed in the labor market is a key barrier to student success statewide. Simply put, students do not attend community college to major in basic skills. They come to us to learn skills and earn credentials that will help them gain meaningful and well-compensated careers and afford them the tools with which to build their lives and improve their communities. Basic skills are foundational, but not the goal, or end point, for students.

We know that stand-alone basic skills when offered in long sequences of coursework disconnected from substantive programs of study in a given major or career path is ineffective for many students. Adult learners face considerable economic challenges, and are unlikely to persist in course work that is perceived as not related to or moving them toward their educational and career goals. According to national research done by Community College Research Center (CCRC) students who ignored placement advice and skipped the developmental sequence altogether were more likely to reach and succeed in college level coursework than students who followed placement advice and enrolled in basic skills

¹ The Career Ladders Project originated out of the California Community Colleges Board of Governors' *Ladders of Opportunity* initiative and operates under the fiscal sponsorship of the Foundation for California Community Colleges (FCCC), a non-profit 501(c)3 organization and the chief auxiliary to the CCC system.

² B. Baran & V. Lovell. (2011) *California's Basic Skills Students: Who Succeeds and Why*. California Budget Project. B. Baran and V. Lovell (2011) *Gateway to a Better Future: Creating a Basic Skills System for California*. California Budget Project.

coursework. This is because the attrition rate is so high in the traditional sequence that the likelihood of their getting through the sequence is very low. According to CCRC only 10% of students who start 3 levels or more below “college level” math actually get to college level mathematics, and only about 25% of those starting at similar levels in English coursework get there.³

Because such large numbers of students simply do not get through these sequences, it is imperative that faculty be supported in developing alternative, accelerated and integrated pedagogical approaches to addressing basic skills instruction. Adult learners do not necessarily need to recapitulate the entire curricular sequence originally offered to them in middle and high school; rather, they could profit from instruction which challenges them as adults, is focused on helping them address gaps in their knowledge and skills and is used to support their skill development while enabling them to start gaining credits which moves them toward certificates or degrees.

Teaching basic skills in context of students’ major or career sector of interest can be far more effective. Wiseley’s recent research on developmental math in the CCCs reveals dramatic differences in the success rates of students in career contextualized math courses compared to those in traditional math courses. Students enrolled in contextualized math were 384% more likely to pass their math class and 387% percent more likely to pass college-level courses that same semester compared to students enrolled in traditional math; and, Wiseley found, the positive impact of contextualized math coursework persisted into the next semester.⁴

Faculty and staff throughout California and several other states are pioneering innovative—and more cost effective—strategies that do improve outcomes for basic skills students. Integrating basic skills with credit-bearing career technical coursework’ “contextualizing” basic skills instruction to make it more relevant to students’ career goals; compressing the course sequence; providing “bridge” programs that connect students to streamlined career pathway programs; providing more intensive student supports – all are showing promise in accelerating student progress and completion of post-secondary credentials so critical to future employment and earnings.

Addressing basic skills education is not only a social justice issue; it is an economic development imperative. The ambitious certificate and degree completion goals being set to make the United States more economically competitive cannot be reached without addressing the intersection of basic skills and career technical education (CTE). Students caught in the current basic skills system are disproportionately students of color, and their success is key to improving the California economy. Given demographic shifts, without effective strategies for all Californian’s to gain the skills they need to contribute to the economy, California will not be able to meet looming skills shortages looming in sector after sector.

In your opinion, what are the benefits or consequences of maintaining basic skills programs in both the adult education and community college systems? How could the state improve the effectiveness of these two systems to maximize the state’s investment in adult education? The state should move to better integrate the offerings and programs of the two systems. While not all who take adult education courses want post-secondary credentials, many more could attain them if offerings were designed to work together to create clear pathways to careers and continuing educational achievement.

³ T. Bailey (2010) et. al. Referral, enrollment and completion in developmental education sequences in community colleges. *Economics of Education Review* 29. P. 261. See also, K. Hern with Myra Snell, (2010) Exponential Attrition and the Promise of Acceleration in Developmental English and Math. *Research and Planning Group Newsletter*.

⁴ W.C. Wiseley (2009). *Effectiveness of Contextual Approaches to Developmental Math in California Community Colleges*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of the Pacific.

Other states have moved to create more coordination between adult education and community colleges. Some have created overarching coordinating boards (WA), while others have brought the governance of the systems together under one roof. Such large-scale structural reforms may not be feasible or even desirable in CA given the magnitude of change they would entail, but these questions could and should be actively explored at the system level. However, addressing governance by itself would not be sufficient to accomplish the kinds of changes that are needed to improve outcomes for basic skills students. Those changes need to be built from the ground up. We need to systematically cultivate, evaluate and spread effective practices and local collaborations among teachers and staff of adult education and community college programs. This could be supported by the state through incentives for collaboration and joint offerings, professional development for faculty and staff, common performance goals and continuing oversight and assessment of progress. At the very least, prioritizing joint programming, concurrent enrollment and inter-segmental partnerships seems a necessary step.

Given the current fiscal situation, leveraging not only the investments in but also the expertise and talents of faculty in both systems is paramount. Care should be taken not to inadvertently increase the distance between the systems, and thus the distance that students need to traverse to secure credentials that matter in the workplace. More rigidly defining and differentiating the basic skills levels and missions between these systems would move them farther apart, and would likely diminish rather than increase the chances that students would reach meaningful goals.

The Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (IBEST) program in the state of Washington has been widely cited as a model for integrating adult education basic skills with community college technical education and has been credited with achieving notable improvements in student course and program completion.⁵ While the IBEST model operates in a different structural context than we have here in California, key practices such as collaboration of adult education and community college faculty and integration of basic skills with technical skills instruction are feasible in California. Many of these practices have been incorporated into the Career Advancement Academies (CAAs) described later in this document, as well as in other local models and programs.

How might changes to the authority and function of the Chancellor's Office improve statewide planning and coordination of their basic education and best practices? What are some of the current limitations that challenge the office in serving these roles. The Career Ladders Project has not researched community college governance structures and issues, and so will refrain from offering detailed recommendations in this area.

However, I can speak from the perspective of the field. By all accounts, the CCC Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) is extremely underfunded relative to its responsibilities for the largest system of higher education in the world. The cumulative impact of repeated budget cuts, hiring freezes and downsizing at the CCCCCO has made very challenging for that office to meet its obligations—much less be able to provide the consistent leadership and vision to implement the overarching initiatives and reforms that higher education systems in other states have been able to accomplish. That the Chancellor's Office accomplishes as much as it does, with so little support and resources, bears testimony to the dedication of the CCCCCO leadership and staff.

Community college practitioners routinely cite the differences between the system office and the campuses as problematic. Differing retirement systems, hiring requirements, and other structural

⁵ D. Jenkins, M. Zeidenberg and G. Kienzl. (2009). *Educational Outcomes of I-Best Washington State Community and Technical College System's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings from a Multivariate Analysis*. Teachers College, Columbia University: Community College Research Center.

differences between the CCCCO state agency status and the colleges – all combine to make it very challenging for there to be permeability, closer correspondence and communication between system office and college personnel. Enabling the system to better take advantage of the deep expertise and leadership found in local districts would be beneficial.

Research and analysis of how other community college and adult education systems across the nation are structured, how applicable these arrangements might be to California and the relative trade-offs of differing governing systems would be valuable.

Could you describe some of the successes of the CAAs in terms of improving basic skills and leading students toward viable careers or other educational opportunities? Based on the work of the pilot regions, what are some of the on-the-ground barriers to addressing basic skills needs?

Successes. The CCC system has made a major investment in developing alternate pathways and accelerated learning for basic skills learners via the Career Advancement Academy (CAA) statewide demonstration project. In partnership with the CCCCO, major California foundations have provided resources to support independent evaluation, data collection, technical assistance and building a learning community across the practitioners engaged in the initiative.⁶

Woven into the CAA framework is an emphasis on accelerated modes of instruction that integrate and contextualize basic skills to occupational content, helping students to move faster through the curriculum and reach basic skills proficiency quickly. Combining foundational basic skills with technical training allows students to make immediate progress toward their goals, rather than having to wait until they've completed a succession of basic skills courses. Having students go through the programs together in a cohort helps build strong peer supports among students. All of these features have shown great promise for connecting basic skills students to higher education and employment.

Over the past three years, CAAs ramped up swiftly to:

- Serve a quarter of the California Community Colleges (29 of 112 colleges) in three major regions: the East Bay, Central Valley, and Los Angeles;
- Spanned 13 economic sectors, heavily concentrated in the allied health, transportation, construction, education, business services, information technology and energy sectors;
- Enrolled nearly 6,400 students statewide between fall of 2007 and fall 2010.

CAA student outcomes are notable.

- Across all regions, 74% of CAA students succeeded in passing or earning a grade of C or better and 89% completed courses attempted. (*See attached CAA handout*).
- Given that enrolled CAA students face multiple barriers to college and career success and are even more underprepared for college level work than basic skills or community college students in general, these rates are especially noteworthy.

Accelerated and contextualized teaching and learning (CTL) take hold. A core element of the CAAs, accelerated and contextualized approaches have galvanized faculty innovation and brought new champions to the work. In each of the regions, faculty are developing curriculum that bridges academic and technical skill development. And, these practices are gaining momentum statewide; they are being infused into the system's Basic Skills Initiative's professional development grant, the CCC Student

⁶ To provide a richly textured look at the CAAs, CLP as recorded CAA student voices across the state. For a brief CAA overview from a students' perspective, go to <http://www.careerladdersproject.org/videoa/vpages/caaoverview10.html>

Success Network (3CSN), and other venues. The CAAs have been pivotal in building institutional will and system-wide support to scale career pathway, accelerated and contextualized strategies more broadly.

CAAs have engaged a multitude of partners, leveraging additional resources and improving services to students as a result. Collectively, CAAs engaged some 262 partnerships with regional industry and businesses, local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), community-based organizations (CBOs), high schools, adult education and others. Active business partnerships have been critical to developing the CAAs across the state. All participating regions have leveraged and aligned resources to reach out to students from underserved communities, develop curricula, improve student services, align curriculum with employer needs and increase the likelihood students will find employment.

While not all CAAs have explicitly partnered with their local adult education providers, CAAs report over twenty local ROP and ABE partnerships involving joint recruitment, referral and/or integrated instruction in basic and technical skills. Building the CAA initiative out to link more explicitly to adult education would be a logical next step, as would learning from the collaborations already in place.

Barriers. While colleges have been able to establish and ramp up CAAs, there are a number of challenges to local implementation for these and similar programs:

- Innovative and effective programs like the CAAs are usually funded on “soft” money or set asides, so are subject to interruption and hard to fully develop and scale more broadly.
- Programs must negotiate complex and sometimes contradictory requirements in order to effectively partner and leverage funds across different systems (workforce, adult education, community college).
- Uncertain budget environment at college and system levels makes continuity and knowledge building more difficult;
- Funding cuts and downsizing threaten offerings, access and attention to underprepared students;
- Traditional structures (faculty load, funding formulas, departments, scheduling, pre-requisites, rigid sequencing) mitigate against faculty collaboration, curricular integration and concurrent enrollment of students in college and basic skills coursework.
- The current assessment system is limited and flawed:
 - Assessment as a sole measure of college readiness is flawed and current assessments have poor predictive power.
 - Over-reliance on single cut score keeps students who could succeed out of college courses (especially those near the “cut score”)
 - Current focus on placement for the basic skills sequence obscures the real need for diagnostic tools to better assess gaps in student knowledge.
 - Ignores other factors such as motivation and perseverance.
- The state lacks an overarching pathways framework and vision to guide policy development, planning and investments at both system and college levels.

Have the CAAs highlighted areas of best practice that could be applied in other colleges?

The CAAs themselves embody a rich array of high-impact strategies that have relevance far beyond this singular initiative. As a result of the formative third party evaluation⁷ of the statewide CAA initiative, we have documented several key success strategies:

- Contextualized, integrated and accelerated modes of instruction.
- Cohort-based learning communities connecting basic skills and career technical education and providing critical peer supports.

⁷ Public/Private Ventures, unpublished evaluation report, 2009.

- Bridge models designed to meet the needs of targeted students with close attention to transition strategies.
- Intensive supports for students that are integrated into the instructional programs and that mobilize resources from both internal and external partnerships. (including workforce and community organizations, unions and other educational partners)
- Strong connections between industry and training in demand-led occupations with clearly defined and understood college and career pathways.

What is needed from the state to bring some of these practices to scale? To continue and expand the Career Advancement Academy demonstration project itself will require continuing investment of targeted funds such as the SB70 funds already envisioned in the current state plan, at a greater level that would enable many more colleges to participate.

In order to bring the core strategies and practices to wider scale—to move them from the margins to the center of our educational offerings—California should provide an overarching pathways vision and framework, matched with appropriate accountability and investments to ensure effective implementation. Important steps in this direction could include:

- Give clear signals from the legislature and administration prioritizing the basic skills mission and underscoring the importance of effectively serving underprepared students.
- Make bridge and career pathway programming a state priority⁸ and stress practices that streamline student movement into college and career across all segments of education and training.
 - Build integrated, clear and well-structured pathways for students to reach their goals.
 - Collaborate with business and industry to ensure the pathways are in demand and meet the needs of employers.
 - Pay special attention to transitions – across systems, from bridge to continuing pathways, adult education to community college, non-credit to credit, from developmental education to college coursework.
 - Promote dual or concurrent enrollment in adult education and community college programs.
- Be deliberate and systematic. Don't keep starting over.
 - It takes time to set up, refine and sustain new practices and programs. Identify and build on successful practices and invest over time to bring them to maturity and scale.
 - Ask the systems to connect the dots across disparate initiatives and allied efforts.
 - Insist on independent evaluation and utilize data for ongoing program improvement of all pilot and demonstration projects;
 - Move effective practices/models from pilot funding to enhanced and sustainable FTES funding model.
 - Support professional development and dissemination strategies to spread effective practice.
- Examine existing funding streams and redirect them toward effective practices and programs.
 - Restructure current investments toward more effective basic skills models and practices
 - Systematically target spending to scale successful practices.
- Provide enhanced basic skills funding that includes clear and expedited pathways for students.⁹

⁸ According to Julie Strawn, at least 7 states have career pathway efforts (AR, KY, IL, MA, OH, OR, VA, WA, WI) aimed at adults. (Under Perkins every state must have pathways for high school students.). Six states have career pathway bridge initiatives (IL, IN, MN, OH, OR, WA, WI). Some states have focused state adult ed plans/RFP's on this. (IL,IN). The Federal Department of Education has prioritized focus on transition to college and career for adult basic education in its Policies to Performance initiative; California's adult education system was selected as a participant and has prioritized transition strategies in current grants to the field. Additionally, there are hundreds of local, career-focused bridge programs, according to 2010 bridge survey from the Workforce Strategy Center. Connecting such local programs into more coherent initiatives with support, evaluation and assistance would increase quality, uptake and sustainability.

- Support development of alternatives to traditional curriculum sequences using linked or contextualized curriculum across curricular areas that can accelerate students’ progress toward their goals.¹⁰
- Make certificate completion – not only degree completion—a priority for the system; prioritize pathway models that include certificates that are “stackable” and nested within the degree and transfer structure to promote students continuing educational and career advancement.
- Pull for more permeable, not more rigid, boundaries across systems.
 - Reduce barriers to inter-segmental collaboration and programming – simplify the funding streams and incentivize or require partnerships across systems.
 - Leverage multiple private and public resources to support post-secondary attainment for lower-skilled adults. Maximize use of public benefits and resources for skill building.
- Build student supports and academic and career advising into everyday academic experience, including into adult education offerings, CCC non-credit and pre-collegiate developmental education classes.
 - College and career success courses, college orientation, peer supports and embedded case management approaches which utilize other funding streams, for example, show great promise and can be less costly than traditional delivery models.
- Support development of diagnostic assessments that help faculty identify and address gaps in students’ knowledge, rather than making adult students recapitulate the K12 sequence.
- Support development of a longitudinal data system that follows students across educational as well as the workforce systems. Such a capacity is foundational to better understanding and improving student outcomes as well as to meeting the skill needs of California employers.

What lessons from the CTE experience, linking high school and community college programs, might apply to improving the delivery of basic skills education? Whether high school students go on to a community college certificate or degree program, apprenticeship or other employment training, or a four year college, all will need some post-secondary training beyond high school in order to be able to earn family sustaining wages and have continuing opportunities for advancement. The Linked Learning approach being developed in California stresses the importance of combining both rigor and relevance; Linked Learning aims to transform high school offerings by integrating academic with technical coursework in order to ensure that all students are prepared for both college and career. Stressing real-world experience and applied learning as integral to student preparation—along with a challenging academic and technical core—this pivotal movement utilizes a pathway approach to organize instruction, developing broad career-themed academies.

Similarly it includes an emphasis on early college going exposure and emphasis, and includes dual high school and community college enrollment as a core strategy for promoting college attainment.

This approach is consonant with the recommendations and perspective presented in this testimony. Reducing the distance, boundaries and separation across educational segments—and between education and career—is critical to increasing post-secondary attainment. An overarching and well developed pathways framework spanning all educational and workforce institutions – K12, adult education, community colleges, apprenticeship programs, CSU and UC as well as private entities—would help reintegrate currently “siloesd” institutional structures and foster student goal completion and capacity to go further with their educational pursuits. It would also help the state succeed in developing a highly skilled, vibrant and diverse workforce, the critical key for California to improve its social and economic standing and competitiveness.

⁹ This recommendation was developed and offered by the Commission on the Future in their report, 2020 Vision for Student Success. Community College League of California (2010).

¹⁰ Also a recommendation of the Commission on the Future.