Opening Doors
Students' Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family, and College

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An important public policy challenge of the twenty-first century is how to increase the opportunities for career mobility and wage progression among low-wage workers. Community colleges have the potential to play an important role in addressing this challenge, since receiving an associate's degree or vocational certificate is related to higher earnings. Yet many low-wage workers do not capitalize on the opportunities offered by community colleges. Either they do not apply or a high proportion of those who do apply and enroll drop out. In presenting findings from Opening Doors to Earning Credentials — a qualitative study that examines community college access and retention issues for low-wage working parents — this report captures the voice of the consumer: current, former, and potential students.

The Scope and Methods of the Opening Doors Study

Based on their demonstrated commitment and capacity to make college offerings more accessible to nontraditional students, including low-wage workers, six community colleges across the nation were selected for the Opening Doors study:

- Cabrillo College in Aptos, California

- LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, New York

- Macomb Community College in Clinton Township, Michigan

- Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon

- Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio

- Valencia Community College in Orlando, Florida

Across these six colleges, eighteen focus groups were conducted involving three groups of low-wage workers: (1) current students enrolled in community college credit-granting programs, (2) former students previously enrolled in community college who left and have not since earned a credential, and (3) potential students who have never attended a credit-granting program at a community college. A total of 131 individuals participated in the focus groups, which consisted mostly of women, between ages 21

and 40, who are parents; they had worked within the prior six months in jobs earning low wages.[1] This sample is racially and ethnically diverse overall.

Several important differences were found across groups:

- Current students prioritized education over employment. They sought jobs that fit their school schedules, which often meant working part time. Almost all current students had a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Current students had fewer children than members of the other two groups.

- Former students prioritized employment over education. Like the current students, nearly all former students had high school credentials. They fell between the other two groups in terms of having family relationships and stability in their personal lives, and they earned higher wages and exhibited more job stability, on average.

- Compared with the other two groups, potential students had fewer family relationships, less life stability, and more crises (such as pending evictions, financial problems, or family issues). Many of the potential students were not as prepared academically to attend college; only half of them had a high school diploma or GED.

Main Themes from the Focus Groups

Overall, most focus group participants believed that a college education would be a valuable investment for increasing their opportunities for career mobility and wage progression. They also felt that obtaining a college education would set a good example for their children. Why, then, do relatively few low-wage workers enroll in community college and earn a credential? No single dominant factor accounted for these participants' decisions about enrollment in or withdrawal from community college. Rather, a constellation of personal, situational, community college, and external factors seems to explain their low enrollment and completion rates. The following major themes from the focus groups convey the various factors that constitute this larger constellation.

Working students typically take more than two years to complete college. The traditional image of a "one-year" certificate program or a "two-year" associate's degree is not the norm for low-wage working students. Most students in the study combined education with full-time or part-time employment. Many current and former students described taking longer than they initially expected to complete their programs (more than two years or even more than five years to complete an associate's degree, for example). They took time off from college to accommodate work or family demands or to earn additional income.

Financial aid — to cover tuition and related costs and to replace lost wages —– is a major factor affecting enrollment decisions. Many low-wage working students said that they could not attend college without financial assistance. Besides needing standard financial aid services, such as tuition assistance and money for books and supplies, they reported an important "income gap" that resulted from

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[1]Former students had to have been working in low-wage jobs when they previously attended college but could be earning higher wages when they participated in the focus groups.

reducing work hours to attend college. When considering enrollment, participants quickly began calculating the short-term economic implications for their families. For single parents especially, this income gap might mean the inability to meet their children's essential needs. Within the realm of standard financial aid services, not all low-wage working students are eligible for such assistance. Some participants exceeded the income qualifications, despite an inability to pay for tuition or other college costs on their own; some were attending school less than half time and thus were not eligible for sufficient assistance; some had defaulted on past student loans or grants; and some were on probation due to poor academic performance in the past.

Balancing work, family, and college is difficult. By definition, the study group included students who were working and had dependent children. Participants' lives were fragile, and a single event might lead to dropping out or taking time off from college. Major personal factors included child care issues (such as its availability and quality, parents' comfort level with the number of hours a child was in care, and varying degrees of understanding on the part of instructors when child care emergencies arose); family and peer relationships (which, when supportive, can make a huge difference); and employers' support (such as flexible work schedules). Some participants mentioned other factors, including discrimination, housing, transportation, and physical or mental health issues (involving themselves or close family members). Some participants — mostly the potential students — also mentioned such barriers as domestic violence and legal issues (usually relating to immigration).

Students need on-campus academic and personal support. Focus group participants expressed the need for a combination of supports and services on campus, including academic and personal counseling as well as financial aid advisement. Some students required special programs to accommodate specific needs, and some called for ongoing counseling rather than isolated, specific counseling services — as might be triggered, for example, by a drop in academic performance.

A gap exists between the services that are available to students and students' awareness of them. Some participants across all the groups — especially the potential students — were not aware of existing college- or community-based resources to help them attend college, including financial aid, personal or academic counseling, and special programs.

Students view individual faculty members as the "front line" of their community college experiences. Students' impressions of their community college are shaped largely by their daily interactions with instructional faculty. Students in the study provided examples of ways in which individual instructors' policies regarding attendance, group versus individual assignments, course load, and late assignments greatly influenced their ability to complete a course. They gave examples of how faculty were instrumental in aiding them when employment or parenting demands conflicted with school responsibilities, and they also conveyed their experiences with faculty who did not take such conflicts into consideration.

Some students require remediation. Some participants expressed a general need for remediation in order to meet course prerequisites or address low English proficiency. Low basic skills or the lack of a high school diploma or GED meant that other participants, particularly potential students, had not been able to meet college entry requirements or to access specific credit-granting occupational courses or programs.

Complex child care needs affect a parent's ability to attend college. Most student parents expressed the need for child care on campus. Even campuses that offered child care had important gaps in services. For example, many child care centers had limited capacity, did not offer care during late-evening and weekend classes, or had age restrictions that included toddlers but not infants or older children. While most parents said that they needed child care on campus, many were also concerned about leaving their children in formal daycare arrangements for additional hours, beyond the hours that their children already spent in care while the parents were at work. Participants asked: At what point am I leaving my child in care too much? Similarly, parents of adolescents were concerned about their children's supervision while they attended evening or weekend classes.

Work-based safety net services provide critical support but can be difficult to access for working students. Although such benefits as Food Stamps, Medicaid, Earned Income Credits (EICs), Section 8 housing vouchers, and child care subsidies are important supports that enable low-wage workers to combine work and college, students can be deterred from seeking help from public programs because agency hours conflict with their job or college schedules, there is often the need for repeat visits, or additional child care must be arranged.

Implications of the Study's Findings

The insights from the focus group participants, combined with lessons from other research, suggest promising strategies that could improve low-wage working students' access to and retention in postsecondary programs. Considering the heterogeneity of the experiences, personal and financial circumstances, and academic preparedness of these current, former, and potential students, postsecondary education may not be for everyone at a given moment in time. Nonetheless, the design and implementation of the following educational, financial aid, and student support service strategies could reach potential students and increase the success rates of current students.

Educational Approaches

Providing bridges between noncredit, remedial classes and credit courses. Participants described the need for remediation to meet college entry requirements or course prerequisites. Remedial programs are often offered on a noncredit basis, and their attrition rates can be very high, so that many students never move from the noncredit to the credit-granting side of the institution. In order to create bridges between noncredit and credit remedial classes, and to provide greater access to remediation, options include improving the quality of noncredit remedial programs (perhaps by integrating remedial and occupational skills) and improving articulation between noncredit and credit classes.

Designing nontraditional course formats. Colleges can work with their public and private partners to create flexible scheduling options that make it easier for nontraditional students to complete certificate and degree programs more quickly. Examples include modular or short-term certificate programs with career ladders in high-growth fields, such as information technology and the health professions; various combinations of distance learning and on-campus classes; and open-entry/open-exit, self-paced, or other flexible formats.

Creating lifelong learning opportunities and career pathways. Colleges and their public or private partners can package nontraditional course offerings to create lifelong learning opportunities and solid career pathways. Such programs delineate various short-term training options or single courses that working students can take in a particular career area, and relevant job opportunities are connected to each "rung" in the career ladder. Students can enter or exit at multiple points, and can return for additional education, as they continue to build on their existing college credentials.

Financial Aid Approaches

The study's findings suggest the need for new or expanded forms of financial aid for working adults and nontraditional students that address both the direct costs of going to school (tuition, books, and supplies) and the opportunity costs of lost wages by reducing work hours to attend school. Potential strategies include working with state governments on new forms of tuition assistance and financial incentives (targeted at low-wage workers or students attending less than half time); expanding work-study programs (by allowing more work hours or providing higher wages and by placements with off-campus employers); and providing employer incentives to make tuition reimbursement programs more available to low-wage working students.

Student Support Service Approaches

Mounting aggressive outreach and marketing campaigns. To bridge the information gap and make working students aware of the support services available, colleges may need to consider more aggressive outreach and marketing campaigns. It may be useful to target low-wage working students specifically, by marketing through community groups, civic organizations, churches, and employers.

Providing on-campus child care. Focus group participants clearly articulated a need for increased availability of high-quality child care that better matches the needs of student parents. Desired services include drop-in child care, evening and weekend care, infant care, and on-campus programs for older children and teenagers.

Creating on-campus student support centers. Colleges could work with local welfare and workforce agencies and with community-based organizations to provide academic and personal counseling, financial aid assistance, on-campus child care, and access to work-based safety net services so that low-wage working students can access all the benefits to which they are entitled (such as Food Stamps, EICs, health insurance, and child care subsidies). Centralized support services would give students one-on-one help in navigating the college system, finding help for ongoing personal problems, and dealing with external agencies.

Providing a welcoming, nondiscriminatory environment. To address the discrimination issues raised by focus group participants, community college administrators and faculty should promote practices that foster a welcoming environment. Students should not be discouraged from participating in any program because of personal characteristics like age, gender, race/ethnicity, or family status. Colleges can create ongoing diversity training programs for administrators, faculty, and staff; on-campus supports to assist students who face unwelcoming classroom environments (including adult reentry programs); and zero-tolerance policies enforced by senior administrators.

Community Partnerships

Colleges will likely need to work with additional partners — including employers, public welfare and workforce agencies, and community-based organizations — to implement the kinds of strategies outlined above. Such partnerships could be structured in various ways: by locating staff of agencies and community-based organizations (or even entire public agencies) on campus; by placing college staff in community locations to recruit potential students, provide instruction, and offer academic or counseling services; and by coordinating resources in ways that expand existing programs and support services for low-wage working students.