Why Community Colleges Can—and Should—Disrupt Higher Education
By Caroline VanIngen-Dunn
January 31, 2016

Community college leaders and advocates have a unique opportunity, indeed responsibility, to address the various ways that community colleges can both disrupt and enhance higher education. This can be a turning point, a moment in which community colleges finally get their due as a smart response to many of the challenges that students and parents are facing.

Consider: A recent Time magazine column touted a “perfect storm” coming to higher education, comprised of “too-high tuition and unhappy parents.” A recent Gallup poll found that college grads are increasingly doubting whether the degree was worth the cost. Another recent survey found that parents are rethinking what matters most when assessing the value of a college education.

This is no shock. We’ve all been hearing—if not experiencing ourselves—the burgeoning frustration about the soaring costs and mounting student debt, as well as growing skepticism that a four-year degree offers the necessary marketable skills that will lead anytime soon to a good job.

The result is nothing less than rethinking the higher ed paradigm and tilting the axis toward community college as a meaningful solution for students seeking a productive experience that will position them for success. Many families may underestimate the potential of community college to lead quickly to a substantial, high-paying job.

Through careful planning and smart decision-making, capable graduates enter the marketplace with a substantial two-year degree, valuable training and skills, and a personal budget unburdened by a mountain of loans to pay off. Or they can move onto a four-year school with solid credentials and fewer financial fears than many of their fellow classmates.

Recognizing its significant benefit for individuals, workforce development and the national economy, it’s no wonder there is growing talk about making two years of community college tuition-free, and that the Administration has called for an additional 5 million community college graduates by 2020. This transformative potential of community colleges is also why the National Science Foundation, Science Foundation Arizona and its board of nationally regarded scientists and educators support my work to expand student participation.

More and more families are discovering the benefits, including smaller classrooms, talented faculty, frequent interaction with instructors, opportunity for undergraduate research, hands-on learning, and internships already as freshmen and sophomores—not to mention earning credentials and certifications that lead directly to well-paying jobs after only two years or less of college.
This surely can help meet the desire of many parents who say that “acquisition of real world marketable skills” is the most important factor when considering colleges, only surpassed by wanting a safe environment.

Of course, this does not minimize the central and often powerful role that four-year colleges and universities play in the lives and careers of their graduates. As a just-released study from the non-profit College Success Arizona notes, graduates with at least a bachelor’s degree in Arizona earn $1.1 million over a lifetime on average, compared with $530,340 for high-school graduates.

This is the golden carrot that helps so many families manage the often overwhelming pressure to finance college tuition, which Bloomberg notes has risen 1,225 percent since 1978. This despite the fact that, according to a 2015 Gallup poll, only 38 percent of graduates between 2006 and 2015 strongly agreed that their college education was “worth the cost.”

To be sure, I’m a community college enthusiast. And while I don’t discount the opportunities provided by a four-year baccalaureate degree, I don’t believe that it represents the only way to become successful. In my state of Arizona, I have worked with 19 accredited community colleges offering dozens of academic degrees and over a thousand occupational degrees, certificates and industry-recognized certifications.

Both urban and rural students have taken advantage of these schools to gather the credentials and skills needed for jobs (many in STEM fields), as well as transfer to a four-year degree program if they desire. I have been particularly excited by a growing number of industry internship programs that not only expand students’ marketable skills—they also give businesses greater understanding of what these students can do and how they can influence and ensure a pool of capable graduates when it’s time for job recruiting.

Expanding opportunities for our students could not be more important, especially for minority students who remain well behind their white counterparts both in terms of choosing higher education and obtaining a two-year or four-year degree. In too many of our higher education institutions (universities and community colleges), less than 15 percent of Hispanic students graduate.

This remains a challenge to all of us who care about moving more of our young people on a productive path into higher education and ultimately into well-paid jobs. This is not mere altruism, since we all benefit when we increase the numbers of educated workers in the economy. This enhances economic development, attracting new companies and expanding the economic potential of existing businesses.
But creating this winning dynamic in the years ahead will depend on community colleges recognizing the central role that they play—especially as more people question the value of higher education—and convincing more families and students that community college can be a big part of their path to success.

References:
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https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education/building-american-skills-through-community-colleges

Caroline VanIngen-Dunn is the Director of Community College STEM Pathways for Science Foundation Arizona. The National Science Foundation has funded SFAz to work with community colleges (grant #1450661), particularly those that are designated Hispanic Serving Institutions and those in rural communities.

For more information: http://www.sfaz.org/stem-pathways/